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Review
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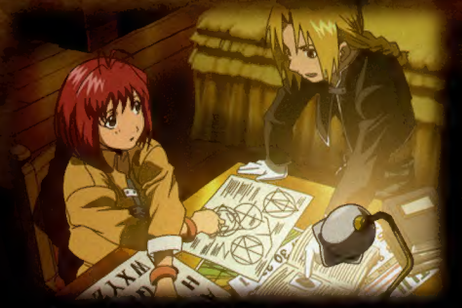
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Letter from the Editor

Behemoth rising

I've seen some power plays in this industry, like Microsoft prying Rare from Nintendo's hands with an ungodly sum of money or Nintendo leaving Sony at the altar for Philips… but none so dastardly as EA actually eliminating its competition (and with it the spectacular ESPN football franchise among others) by essentially buying their right to stay in the game. "It's in the game" has now become "It's the only game." In a $300 million-plus deal with the NFL, EA has purchased the sole rights to NFL teams, players and stadiums, encompassing action, simulation, arcade-style and manager games for PCs, consoles and handhelds, for the next five years. So rather than investing $300 million into once again raising the bar, EA has instead purchased the bar and beaten NFL game fans' right to choose with it. When did this even become an option? Is this money and greed at its worst or big business at its best? I wonder if most companies would do this even if they could. I'm betting not, as it stifles the very foundation of what makes any entertainment medium great, including the NFL: competition. If ESPN is raining on EA's parade, they should make a better game, not go $300 million in the hole to not have to. I find it hard to believe that over the next five years the competition would have taken that much out of EA's pockets in the first place. Speaking with our sports editor Tom Ham, 989 PR manger Ron Eagle stated, "Sony Computer Entertainment America has always championed competition and diversity on our platforms. We are surprised and dismayed by the NFL and NFL Players Inc.'s decision and the long-term implications of that decision for console platforms." Sentiments we're sure are shared by many.
Adding fuel to the "if you can't beat 'em, buy 'em" fire, just days after their "deal" with the NFL, EA announced it had completed a transaction with a European investment firm for a block of share equivalent to 19.9 percent of Ubisoft Entertainment, meaning one of Ubisoft's chief competitors now owns the second most sizable voting block of its shares. Doh! While Ubisoft president Yves Guillemot tried to soften the blow with diffident statements like "the deal emphasizes the strategic importance of Ubisoft's position in the video game industry," one of his colleague's sentiments—"pending further information, we consider this operation as hostile"—seems more apropos. It's easy enough to see the motivation here. EA is obviously frazzled that Peter Jackson hitched his 800-plus pound gorilla to Ubisoft. Were it not for his decision to hook up with Michel Ancel and co. for what will most assuredly be a groundbreaking game, you can bet that EA would have never optioned such a massive piece of the rock. On top of all this, recent allegations of alleged sadistic working conditions have lead to a class action lawsuit by EA employees, citing extreme job stress and health problems. It's been my understanding that sadistic working conditions and game creation have always been synonymous, so it's anyone's guess where, if anywhere, this will ultimately lead.

From Zany Golf to gaming's Death Star in just over a decade, one thing is for sure: the house that Madden built is certainly on one massive roll. From where I sit, I loved Freakstyle, the LOTR games were great, and they saved Stranger's Wrath, so unless they buy Mario and hang him from a flagpole, I'm cool. That said, however, I've never been so relieved to *not* be into team sports games. EA should hand VC the Mutant League license as a token of good faith… Speaking of which, the thought of Midway delivering a truly badass version of Blitz and whatever VC might do in the wake of the NFL ban certainly has me intrigued. Wouldn't it be great if one of the sidelined publishers created the next big thing in football games to make the NFL look passé? That would certainly get me back in the game. Anyone remember Baseball 2020 on the Neo-Geo? Food for thought…

"If ESPN is raining on EA's parade, they should make a better game, not go $300 million in the hole to not have to."

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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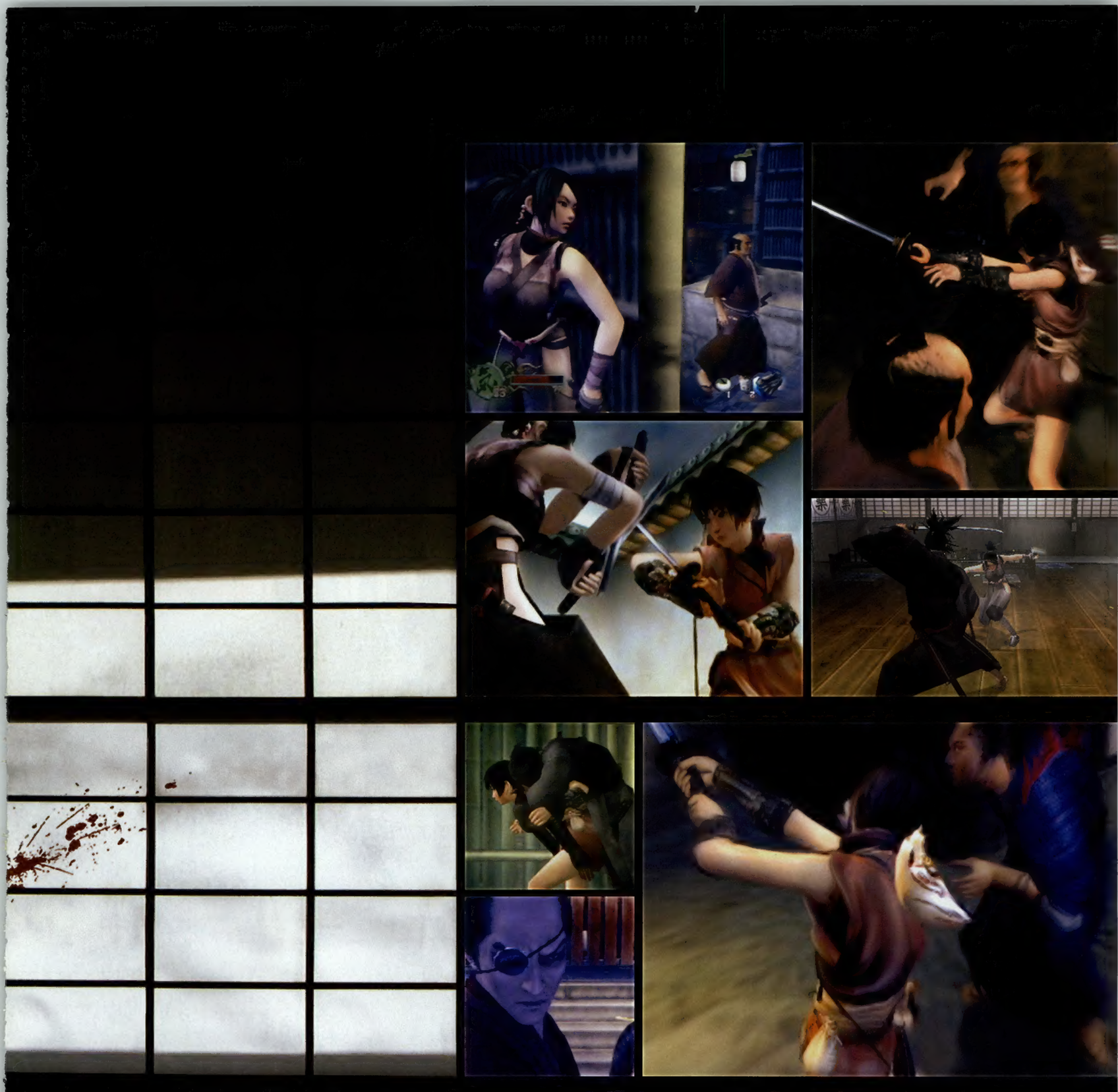


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playback

letters@playmagazine.com



Spiked

What's with Spike TV and the Video Game Awards? Who the hell decided that they had the right or responsibility to put on such an event? I know they did the first year in '03, and although I didn't see it, I read about what a piece of crap it was. Well, I can't even bring myself to watch the remainder of tonight's show; I thought I'd write you guys a letter to vent my frustration instead.

Since when did the video game world become dominated by the hip hop culture, and why does the "rest of the world" have to be given the impression that game players are made up of a bunch of violence-loving rappers of crap? I've been a true gaming enthusiast for over 25 years; way before gaming was cool. Although I enjoy my share of shoot 'em up games and adult content, I don't understand why we have to embrace violence as so much a part of what makes a game fun. This violence and profanity-laced hip hop culture is really beginning to drag down an industry that's supposed to be all about fun and enjoyment.

Who and what could possibly influence someone, somewhere, somehow to put on a real video game awards show, whereby legitimately talented people participated in a well-produced and "sane" event. Let's bring video games into the true mainstream that they've already placed themselves in; that of big-budget Hollywood productions. Let's ditch Spike TV's twisted interpretation of what a game award show should be.

Nauseated Video Game Enthusiast
Keith D.

Touch that dial!

Dear Play,

Okay, yeah, the Spike Awards sucked majorly and made every real gamer's skin crawl, that's a big fat fact, but can we talk about game-based TV on the whole here? What's next, topless girls on unicycles recreating scenes from San Andreas? Since when did games become about fast edits, one liners and hot chicks? Are they all smoking crack? I've waited my entire life for the intelligent depiction of the industry, behind the scenes, developer insight and maybe just maybe some really great Japan coverage and I get over zealous nerds, sports gimps, and girls spouting off about codes? Kill me. Anyway, what do you guys think of G4? I notice they only ever use you guys when they cover a game you guys would embrace, which isn't often. Do you know anyone that works there? Why is it so crap? Is this the only way they can make money or something?

> "Since when did games become about fast edits, one liners and hot chicks? Are they all smoking crack?"

Ken M.

Scoring the scoring

I came across your magazine not too long ago and was surprised by the content. I was reminded of Next Generation, which (for me) has been the watermark for the video game publication industry. Fortunately, your Play magazine seems to avoid the same unreadable type on unsettling background color that had plagued NG.

As I was impressed, I recently started a subscription and picked up your most recent issue off the newstand. As your website is still under construction and yet to fully embrace an online community, I am writing this to address a comment made in regarding to the grading system used in reviews. I have always found the number/final grade to be cursorily important as a summation and less so when the review is well written. What I would like to see is a percentile system that compares and ranks games alongside one another. A 3.5 does not immediately strike meaning on the reader and seems more a grudging nod that there need be a final score at all. But if you tell the reader this game falls in the top 10% of its type of game, that perspective adds a different value and one that can be more easily understood. I would also like to see a revisiting of games 6 or 12 months after a release. Gamers often do not pick up a title upon immediate release (especially during a holiday season glut) and games themselves also achieve a different view when viewed on a longer timeline. There is a mad rush to constantly talk about what is new and what is coming at the constant expense of everything that preceded. Good luck with your magazine and best wishes on creating a substantial online presence.

Henri Clinch

Love love love the new preview points of interest and the plus and minus points you added to the reviews, but I have to be honest. As much as I love the mag, and I do, a lot, you really need to rethink the star thing. Didn't you start Play with 5 stars? You know this sucks, right? I mean you had to have known you were copping out. You guys give a lot of high scores because you only do big reviews on certain games, which I really appreciate, but it would be nice to be able to see why without having to read every review. 4 stars = step backwards. By the way, why don't you at least make a place for abbreviated reviews of low scoring games? And where did retro go? If you really want to make me happy, bring it back every month!

Almost happy D.

Look guys, it's no big mystery. Give us a number and some bullet points and we can call it a day. What's next, thumbs up?

Jeffrey K.

Thanks for the comments, guys. Seriously, we're listening to your criticisms and we'll take your suggestions into advisement over the coming months. Anybody else care to add their two cents, pro or con?

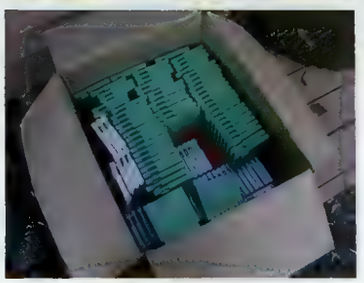
Cart Crazy

Hey guys, Just wanted to show you guys a project that I have been working on and recently finished. It took me about 190 NES cartridges to make. No real reason or point to it. I always wanted to do a project using NES carts, and am a huge Metroid fan, so the idea came to me one day. I thought you guys might find it interesting. I hope you like it!

Matt

Oh, we find it interesting alright (if not a little scary) as we're sure will others. One question: Where did you get all those NES carts?





RACING GEARS ADVANCE

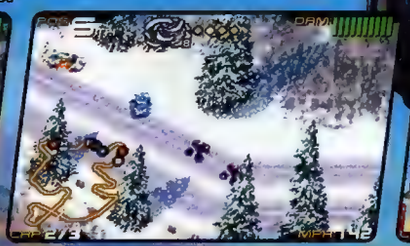
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GAME BOY ADVANCE SP

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Sony does it again

The PSP hits Japan, expected in the U.S. in March





Sony's revolutionary PSP handheld arrived in Japan on Dec. 12, 2004, ushering in what will likely be a new era in handheld gaming. Not surprisingly, the PSP was essentially a complete sell out on launch day, with the rather meager supply of 200,000 units immediately being snatched up by the Japanese gaming public and import-happy gaijin. The best-selling title of the launch line-up was Minna no Golf Portable (Hot Shots Golf), followed by Ridge Racers, with 70,000 units and 60,000 units sold respectively on launch day. At the annual Consumer Electronics Show, held January 6-9 in Las Vegas, Nevada, Sony Computer Entertainment America CEO Kaz Hirai stated that the PSP will "likely" hit the U.S. in late March, but did not mention a price (though we still expect $200). Several titles scheduled for release at or near the system's U.S. launch were announced, however, including ATV Offroad Fury, Hot Shots Golf, Ape Escape, Twisted Metal: Head-On, NBA 2005, Wipeout Pure, Ridge Racer, Coded Arms, Darkstalkers Chronicle, Spider-Man 2, Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix, Dynasty Warriors, Metal Gear Acid, FIFA Soccer, NBA Street, NFL Street and MVP Baseball.

Got games?

From shooting to sports to action-RPGs, the PSP has the genres covered



Coded Arms - Konami This FPS offers four-player action and 30 weapons.



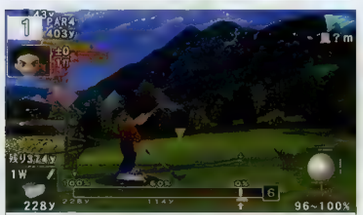
Ridge Racer - Namco Ridge Racer on PSP seems even better than on PS2.



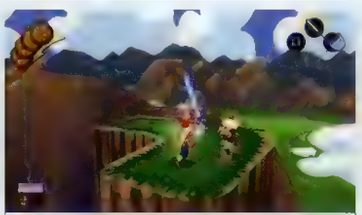
Twisted Metal: Head-On - Sony Wireless vehicular versus combat.



Wipeout Pure - Sony The futuristic racing series continues.



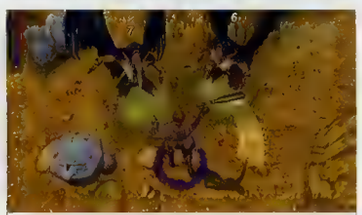
Hot Shots Golf - Sony Customize your character and challenge six courses.



Ape Escape - Sony Catch all 200 monkeys in more than 20 levels.



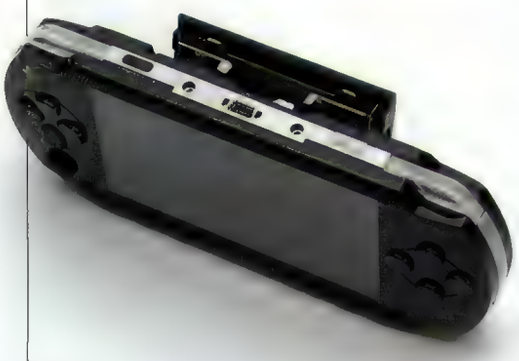
Spider-Man 2 - Activision Enemies like Vulture, Shocker and Rhino await.



Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade - Sony Online Entertainment

First Impressions

Sony's PSP is a little wonder



The first time you actually lay eyes—followed quickly by hands—on a Sony PSP, it becomes clear why Sony is so dominant. The sleek design exudes simplicity and functionality and feels like no portable you've ever held: no gimmick here, just the most powerful handheld gaming machine ever made, regional lockout-free and reporting for duty. You wouldn't even know it had shoulder buttons, they're so nicely formed; the buttons are clearly marked and in the traditional Sony pattern, and the flat analog is simply brilliant—the most buttery directionals you've ever felt. Powering up, the clutter-free interface is just as impressive and well-designed as the unit itself, utilizing a horizontal row of options (settings, photo, music, video and game) with a vertical list of functions for each. The PSP comes in peace; it wants to be your friend. Managing music, photos and network settings is self-explanatory. You need not even crack the manual to dial everything in. Sliding in that first über-cool UMD disc the true power is revealed as you witness console-quality widescreen gaming and sound in the palm of your hands. The PSP doesn't look or feel like a toy. It feels like new hardware is supposed to, emanating that euphoric feeling of newness that only new hardware can bring. You need only look as far as Metal Gear Ac!d, Ridge Racers or Darkstalkers to know we're not in Kansas anymore. The 3D and 2D capabilities here are shockingly good. Acid is a great addition to the MGS lineage, filled with exquisite hand drawn art and magnetic strategy; Darkstalkers in widescreen with every last frame intact is a thing of pure beauty; and Ridge Racers on PSP is simply unbelievable. Imagining what the future will bring, the PSP has just significantly raised the bar for handheld gaming.

Fantastic concert tour

Final Fantasy symphony starts in Chicago

If you're one of the many die-hard Final Fantasy fans who wasn't able to attend last May's Final Fantasy concert in Los Angeles, it looks like you'll be getting another chance. Square Enix is throwing a phoenix down your way in the form of a continuing Final Fantasy concert tour—called "Dear Friends: Music from Final Fantasy," just like the LA concert—that will kick off February 19, 2005 in Chicago, Illinois. Held at the Rosemont Theatre in the Chicago suburb of Rosemont, the two-hour concert will feature, not surprisingly, music from throughout the rich legacy of the Final Fantasy series, and will be produced by famed series composer Nobuo Uematsu. The Chicagoland Pops Orchestra, including its Festival Choir, will perform the concert, with Grammy award-winner Arnie Roth conducting.

"After the fantastic support received at the first concert in Los Angeles," stated Uematsu in a press release, "I am thrilled and honored to extend the experience to Chicago. I'm looking forward to sharing the moments with those who love the music and games of Final Fantasy."

Although more concerts are planned as part of the tour, the specifics have not yet been revealed. As of press time, tickets were still available for the Chicago concert at www.ticketmaster.com/venue/32892, with prices ranging from $33 to $145.

Dear Friends
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EA sidelines the competition

Exclusive NFL deal signed through 2009

Evidently feeling the heat from the competition, Electronic Arts has reached deep into its pocketbook to monopolize the NFL license as far as video games are concerned. Under the new deal, Electronic Arts becomes the exclusive license holder for the NFL, including its players and stadiums, through 2009, for all game console, PC and handheld system software—the only exclusions being internet-based and wireless (cell phone) games. Financial terms for the five-year deal were not disclosed, but speculation by various media outlets runs the gamut from doubled royalty payments to a billion-dollar expenditure by EA. Obviously, this agreement comes as a blow to game fans who value the freedom of choice and may have preferred games such as Sega/Take Two's ESPN NFL 2K5, which experienced increased sales and acclaim in 2004, although its performance still came in a distant second behind EA's Madden NFL 2005.

EA, meanwhile, is touting that its new agreement will allow more features into its NFL games, such as those rising from access to the footage of NFL Films and the NFL Network. EA also stated in its announcement that the deal would permit "all aspects of the interactive experience—including console-based fantasy football features and handheld game devices" to be incorporated into one product, suggesting that a fantasy-football mode may be added into upcoming editions of the Madden franchise. It's also possible that EA will broaden its library with a pure fantasy football management sim to sit alongside the NFL Street and Madden series, as the release stated that their agreement covers "action simulation, arcade-style and manager games." At any rate, there will certainly be fewer NFL games to choose from this year and in the future as new systems make their debuts, but that doesn't mean that the competition is just giving up. Shortly after EA's announcement, Midway revealed that they will be releasing a new version of their arcade-style football series this fall with Blitz: Playmakers. Midway promises this Blitz will be even wilder than before now that they won't have to be approved by the NFL.

News Bits

If you can't get enough of Namco's Katamari Damacy, you'll be glad to know that a sequel is on the way, likely to include multiplayer action… Konami will be reorganizing its studios, absorbing Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo (Castlevania, Silent Hill, etc.), Konami Computer Entertainment Japan (Metal Gear) and Konami Online back into Konami proper on April 1, 2005. It's unknown if this will affect any game development… Speaking of Konami, a Castlevania comic book is coming from IDW publishing… EA has invested into Ubisoft, purchasing nearly 20 percent of the French company's stock. Ubi officials have commented that it may be a hostile takeover attempt and are responding by contemplating a merger with VU Games… Buena Vista Interactive has announced that it will now assume publishing duties for Capcom's Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge. The game is still Capcom-developed, but has been rescheduled for a Halloween 2005 release, and is now coming for Xbox as well as PS2… In other Capcom news, Mega Man Anniversary Collection is headed to Xbox… If you have a copy of the craptastic software called The



Guy Game, it may now be a collector's item (you know, if you collect poo), as an Austin, Texas judge has ordered that sales of the game be halted as the result of a lawsuit by an underage girl who appeared topless in the game. Let's watch in horror as the eBay prices climb… In its annual financial report, Rockstar parent Take Two revealed that Xbox and PC versions of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas are coming in June… If you're as confused about the naming of SNK as we are, you'll be glad to know that the two Japanese branches have combined to form a single entity called SNK Playmore, and the U.S. division has been renamed SNK Playmore USA… Atlus has announced a deluxe box set for its upcoming RPG, Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga. It will include controller stickers, an art box and a soundtrack CD.

Purchase any title featured below at your nearest Virgin Megastore or online at [redacted]

database

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
02	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
03	**Mercenaries** lucasarts / ps2, xb
04	**NFL Street 2** ea / ps2, xb, gc
05	**The Getaway: Black Monday** sony / ps2
06	**The Punisher** thq / ps2, xb
07	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
08	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
09	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
10	**Star Wars: KOTOR II** lucasarts / xb



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Nov. Game Sales

01	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
02	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
03	**Halo 2 Limited Edition** microsoft / xb
04	**Need for Speed Underground 2** ea / ps2
05	**WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw** thq / ps2
06	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2
07	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
08	**The Incredibles** thq / ps2
09	**Need for Speed Underground 2** ea / xb
10	**Super Mario 64 DS** nintendo / ds



Your Megastore Beckons!



NFL Street 2
ea / ps2, xb, gc

Dominate the neighborhood in EA's latest off-the-hook take on the NFL. Run up a wall to dodge some fools, then take it hard into the endzone!



Mercenaries
lucasarts / ps2, xb

Pick your faction and lead a war of mass destruction. Open-ended battles and multiple points of solution pull you deep into the fray.



Resident Evil 4
capcom / gc

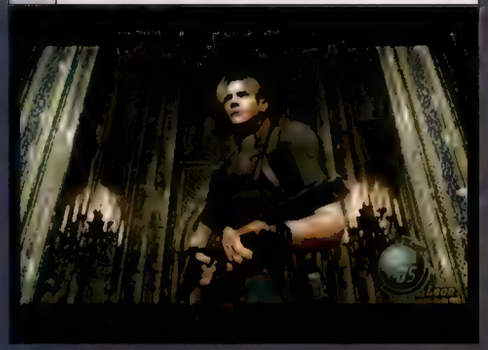
Capcom redefines Resident Evil and takes the experience to a whole new level. The world might not be ready for a game this amazing.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

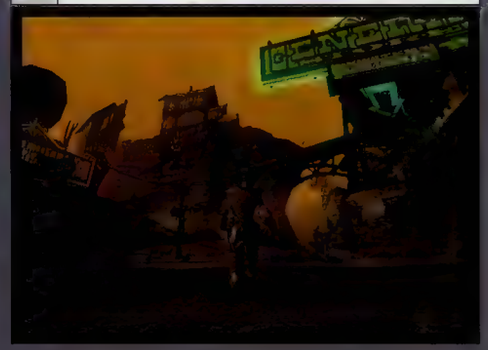
Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
02	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
03	**The Legend of Zelda** nintendo / gc
04	**Devil May Cry 3** capcom / ps2
05	**Jade Empire** microsoft / xb



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath** ea / xb
02	**Psychonauts** majesco / xb
03	**Ys: Ark of Napishtam** konami / ps2
04	**Phantom Dust** majesco / xb
05	**Prince of Persia: Warrior Within** ubisoft / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Shadow of Rome** capcom / ps2
02	**NFL Street Vol. 2** ea / ps2atari / ps2
03	**Paper Mario: Thousand-Year Door** nintendo / gc
04	**Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone** atari / xb
05	**MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf** microsoft / xbox



Chris Hoffman game editor

01	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
02	**NanoBreaker** konami / ps2
03	**Sonic Heroes** sega / gc
04	**Metal Slug Advance** snk / gba
05	**Xenosaga Episode II** namco / ps2

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Ridge Racers** namco / psp
02	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
03	**Shadow of Rome** capcom / ps2
04	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
05	**Donkey Kong Jungle Beat** nintendo / gc

Ashley Esquada associate editor

01	**EverQuest II** sony online entertainment / pc
02	**Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines** activision / pc
03	**Paper Mario: Thousand Year Door** nintendo / gc
04	**Kingdom Hearts: COM** square enix / gba
05	**Katamari Damacy** namco / ps2


play games



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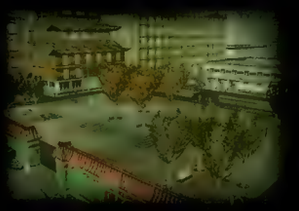
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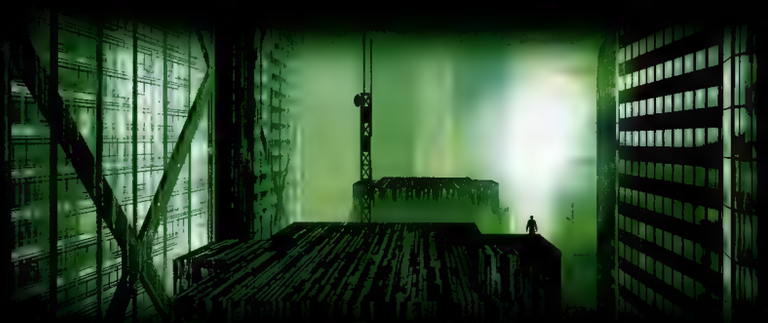


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- Escape character regret. Reconfigure your character's abilities and performance on demand.



- Communicate with people in and out of the game in real-time using AOL® Instant Messenger™ technology.



Three years have passed since Trevor Belmont and his companions vanquished Dracula. But the magic power of the curse Dracula unleashed upon his death began infecting all of Europe. Pestilence, mob violence and heresy became rampant, and people continued to fall deeper into darkness...

Amidst all of this, Hector—a Devil Forgemaster who had once refined his skills under Dracula—has fled in pursuit of a peaceful life as a human. He never imagined that his old friend Isaac, the other Devil Forgemaster, would suddenly appear and implicate his wife in a deadly conspiracy. As vengeance for his beloved wife, Hector pursues Isaac back to his former home, now completely morphed by Dracula's dark magic...

CASTLEVANIA
CURSE OF DARKNESS

With an emphasis on adventure, Castlevania again beckons

The most exalted, time-honored action game franchise in all of gaming, Castlevania has become renowned for fusing action and art like no other game series in history. The combination of Koji "Iga" Igarashi's vision, Ayami Kojima's art and the music of Michiru Yamane have produced some of gaming's most compelling moments, monsters and myths, leaving an indelible mark on its disciples worldwide. Castlevania doesn't have fans; it has an order of purveyors, like Dracula's own concubines. What Miyamoto is to Mario, Kojima to Metal Gear, and Itagaki to Ninja Gaiden, Igarashi is to Castlevania: a form of union that has become all but extinct since the criteria for getting an original game approved has become synonymous with creators handing over the rights to their creations. Perhaps that is why we cling so tightly to the few visionaries we have left. The declaration of each new Castlevania brings about a level of almost unbearable anticipation followed by almost ritual gameplay and then tribunal. It's a beautiful thing.

We found out about Iga's latest assault on Castle Dracula (and this time its grounds) back in early November (talk about keeping a secret), but weren't allowed a peek at the game until mid-December, leading to weeks of speculation and hope as to whether or not Iga would finally do for 128-bit 2D what he did for 32-bit when he created arguably the best video game ever made in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. And while he's elected not to once again, you'll discover here that he's not only willing, but plans to, giving the Castlevania faithful solace in the fact that 2D Castlevania will one day live again.

For its final bid on PS2 following Lament of Innocence, Iga seems focused on perfecting Castlevania in 3D, and given the way he's going about it by way of a strengthening the RPG elements that have always lurked in the shadows of Castlevania, we think we can see our way clear to waiting a bit longer for side-scrolling Castlevania to live again... Dave Halverson

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

Point of Interest

Castlevania artist Ayami Kojima (see cover) was an office worker until she was asked to do some illustrations part time. She never took art in school or imagined it as a career; it was merely a hobby.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: Fall 2005

"The declaration of each new Castlevania brings about a level of almost unbearable anticipation..."



Interview

Koji "Iga" Igarashi
producer, Castlevania series



"I want to keep working on 2D games. However, my current goal is to make a better 3D action game, so that's taking a big part in me right now."

play: Here we are again! How have you been?
Koji Igarashi: I'm dead...err...not... I'm doing fine, thanks!

The best news we ever get is that a new Castlevania is coming. Have you been working on this alongside NanoBreaker? How do you divide your time these days?
Recently, NanoBreaker's been settled, so I spend most of my time on Castlevania.

When you embark on a new game in the series, who comes up with the time and storyline and the lead character? Is there a committee or is it all you?
Oh yes, it's all by myself. I discuss the game concept with my director first and when the specification is confirmed, I come up with the characters and timeline. Then I work on a detailed storyline. There are times when my team makes specific requests such as including a certain monster in the game that does a special attack. For those kinds of requests, I often need to implement those into my script.

Even though side-scrolling games are rare these days, Symphony of the Night is regarded by many as one of the best games ever made and did well when everything else was going 3D. Do you feel you've taken 2D Castlevania as far as it can go? Is that the reason you haven't made a side-scroller for console since?
Oh yes, 2D is my favorite game style too! I want to keep working on 2D games. However, my current goal is to make a better 3D action game, so that's taking a big part in me right now.

Onto the new game, which looks beautiful, as usual...
Thank you very, very much! Those comments will be a big encouragement to all of our staff. Please say it more! [laughs]

As Dracula's ex-Forgemasters, neither Hector nor Isaac is associated with the Belmonts. Is this a darker, more personal story within the confines of Castle Dracula?
This time, the game is themed with "revenge." It may sound unusual for Castlevania; in that sense, it may be darker. Belmont? Yes, there will be. But how? Please look forward to how the Belmonts interact with this story.

This installment takes place three years after Trevor defeated Dracula, making it 1479, around the same time Alucard was introduced. Might their paths intersect at some point?
Alucard rests in magic sleep right after he defeated Dracula in 1476. I'm sure the Hector and Alucard timeline tells that there is some intersection between them, but in this game, there will be no episodes on them.

We've seen a few areas outside of the castle. Does a lot of the gameplay take place outside? Have you expanded the scope of the game?
Oh, yes. We expanded the scope of the game. Last time with Lament of Innocence, it was set under the concept of "castle in the night"—this one is new. So with this game, we are planning on outside stages. This time, stages are set not only in the castle, but the environment that surrounds the castle.

The ability to cultivate and mature Innocent Devils to do Hector's bidding sounds incredibly intriguing. Is this a main mechanic in the game?
Yes, this is the main mechanic of the game. Innocent Devils will function to assist your battles and movement.

How does the player evolve the Innocent Devils? What is "devil forgery"? Are these the guys that have been throwing nasty beasts at us all these centuries?
Devil forgery is to generate devils by using magic power, just like an alchemist. With gigantic power to create devils—this is how we came up with the naming devil forgery. Innocent Devils made from devil forgery are exactly the same as you fought against for all these centuries, just from its image, but in this game it might be better to think that they're something else. Thus, enemies you'll be confronting in the game will *not* be Innocent Devils. Innocent Devils exist as something else in the game. And these Innocent Devils grow (or get fed) by the player as you defeat monsters in the game, and each Devil will evolve according to your gameplay. Evolution will branch according to how you collect them.

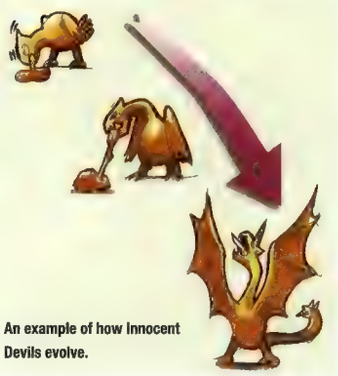




Images such as this are what Castlevania fans live for...

Do they travel with Hector or are they area-specific?
An Innocent Devil is always with Hector. There are five different Devil types; each type branches out to a couple of variations. Not all of them exist or appear in the game; the player has to use devil forgery at some certain point in the map to generate a new type. In the game, the player can [actively] use one Innocent Devil, but he can keep a couple of types all the time and switch to the suitable Innocent Devil according to the situation.

Aside from the Devils, what other types of adventure or role-playing features are you implementing?
The player is introduced with experience points. Also, weapon variation is set.



An example of how Innocent Devils evolve.

Equipped items such as swords and spears can be switched. The core part of the adventure element is basically the new Innocent Devil feature.

How are sub-weapons and magical powers being handled this time?
This time, sub-weapons and magical relics will be Innocent Devils. They have their own special abilities, so the player will utilize its characteristic to clear each land formation. Also, Innocent Devils master various attacks as the game proceeds. In that, it utilizes magic consumption in the game.

How is the gameplay balanced? Does it lean toward melee, platforming, exploration and puzzle solving?
The gameplay is balanced mainly on battle. Yet, elements using the Innocent Devils will add an exploration element in the game. We have many, many gimmicks and traps in the game, so I'm confident players will get their fill of adventure elements as well.

So, the method of forging ahead, opening new areas by acquiring items and moves has been put on hiatus...
The keywords to access to new areas are Innocent Devils. Their abilities, such as using monster power, for example, will help the player to easily open heavily closed doors.

Flying ability is another thing...the player can cling on to an Innocent Devil and fly over a valley, etc.

Will this game's bosses be of the massive behemoth variety or more the crafty undead type?
We're prepared with various types of monsters, from humanoid undead types to gigantic monsters. Exclusively for Play, we've prepared one of the gigantic types. This is a really big monster!

Is there anyone else left in the castle at this point aside from mutated beasts? Might we meet some new inhabitants?
In this game, the story progresses as Hector encounters with a few people. So unlike Lament of Innocence, where the player interacts only with monsters...[that] is not applied in the new game. When you say inhabitants, a witch who evaded the witch hunt lives in Wallachia, where the Castlevania story is based.

Will there be a shop of any kind, or does leveling-up happen solely in real time?
...The witch I mentioned will run a shop. Also, the player can increase the number of Innocent Devils in the game. For Devils Hector cannot take, this witch will take care of them. Leveling up happens when you defeat monsters in real time.





An Innocent Devil comes to Hector's aid to open a previously impenetrable passage.

"Hector utilizes Innocent Devil power. He can fly in the air, move with high speed, or even attack with some overwhelming power..."

Koji "Iga" Igarashi, producer

The first time Alucard ran into the castle...seeing the character animation... hearing the music fade in...that is one of the single greatest moments in gaming history. Do you still pay special attention to each entrance? Think you'll ever top that?
Of course, we always aim to go over the top of what we created in the past. With this game as well, we want to go beyond that of our past games!

Tell us about Hector. With his sword and experience points, he seems a bit like Alucard...
Hector has nothing to do with Alucard, but if I pick up some look-alike parts, both of them have Dracula-side abilities. And that neither of them is even interested in Dracula. Hector himself once respected him in the past.

When Dracula started to harm humans back in 1476, Hector decided to leave Dracula's party, made a decision to go back to a normal life. But his old buddies wouldn't forgive him. They spent three years to find out where Hector was, and informed his beloved that she was a witch to a heretic advisory committee.

Hector, seeing his beloved punished for no reason, discovered that one of the reasons she was killed was due to the other Devil Forgemaster, Isaac. Hector then returns to his hometown Wallachia to find Isaac. He can use a sword because he's trained with various weapons and to treat Innocent Devils effectively.

How does he fight? Is he limited to the sword, or will he wield other weapons?
He uses various weapons such as swords, axes, spears, etc. It's up to the player to decide what to use depending on its ability of power, speed, etc.

Arguably the most elegant and graceful character ever created, is it possible to capture the fluidity of Alucard in 3D? The way he ran with that slight forward lean echoed by trails of essence... Think polygons will ever get us back there?
Oh, well, it is quite tough to express things when it turns into a 3D environment. Especially with echoed trail essence, as it is hard to make it happen in 3D. When you say slightly forward, I assume how he starts running? If so, maybe we can meet your request...

Aside from walking and running, does Hector have any special evasion tactics, powers or athletic prowess?
Hector utilizes Innocent Devil power. He can fly in the air, move with high speed, or even attack with some overwhelming power—it all becomes possible by Innocent Devils.

What are you most proud of regarding the actual Hector model? What will he be remembered for?
We will continuously work to polish and revise his model, but in the final product, you'll be seeing close to that of Ayami Kojima's character design. Simply looking at it will leave remembrance in each player's mind. Also, motion itself has been made extravagantly, so I see some elegant fight battle images too.

Speaking of the games technology: is this a new engine?
Based upon Lament of Innocence, we used the polished game system from the NanoBreaker and Silent Hill engine and re-created the whole new engine for this game.

In constructing the world, is your emphasis on mass or detail...or a bit of both? Are there actual expanses in the game where we can see far into the distance?
The emphasis is on overall image. As to the detailed part, I have a group of talented and reliable resources, so I leave everything up to them. Whether or not you can see far into the distance...since Wallachia is very

mysterious and a fantasy world, it may not be so visible in the distance, but there will be some areas that are definitely wide-open for you to see.

It's still linear though, right? Or will it branch like Castlevania III?
It will not be a branch type, but not as linear as Lament of Innocence. To make it easier for you to understand, it will be reminiscent of Symphony of the Night, where all maps are connected [and] each area is accessible.

What about lighting, texturing and special effects? You always manage to raise the bar. Any new tricks up your sleeve?
With this new product, since we're planning a free camera angle, I'm asking my team staff to work harder on texturing than Lament of Innocence. Any tricks? [laughs] We just do our best, that's all. Right now, the team is really trying to come up with the best effects for the game.

Are you working with the same team as Lament?
The main core staff is from Lament. In addition to the core staff from the previous game, we have NanoBreaker team staff as well as Silent Hill team staff.

You must be intrigued by the specs of the GameCube and Xbox. Why develop solely for PS2?
The main reason for developing on PS2 is because we had Lament of Innocence on PlayStation 2. And I guess the installed base of the hardware is the major factor. But, that doesn't mean that I'm not interested in other consoles.

Way back when the most anticipated Dreamcast game was, of course, Castlevania Resurrection, it featured a female lead, Sonya Belmont (Trevor's mother, I suppose). Have you considered another Castlevania with a female lead?
I'm always thinking of having a female lead character for my game. Especially because with my stories, a female dies most of the time...

For this game, since the concept was on "revenge," I simply thought it would be better suited for a male character rather than female. But it's a good point. When I look back [on] why I don't have many female characters in Castlevania, it may be because I worked too much on Tokimeki Memorial in the past, and I'm unconsciously avoiding that part!

You realize that if you put the lost levels of Resurrection into a new Castlevania as a bonus, you would make our lives complete. Does the game actually exist in some form somewhere?
Hmm...very tough request. Actually, I'm sooo tied up with the current project itself, I'm not sure if I can work on that part. But it's interesting idea I would like to carry out sometime in future.

It's been an honor once again. Best of luck completing the game. See you at E3!
See you soon!



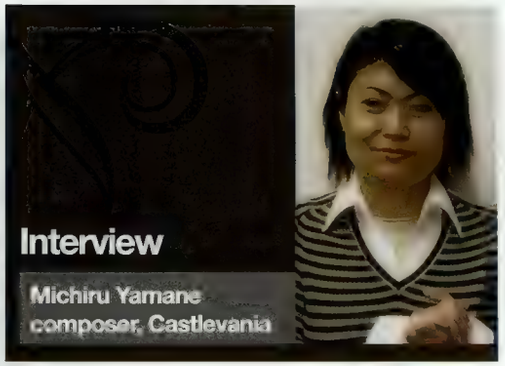


Coverage continues with an interview with Castlevania music composer Michiru Yamane





Hector and a winged friend take on one of the game's many familiar creatures.



"With this project, I have aimed more somberness and divinity into the orchestral sound, as well as going back to elements from Symphony of the Night..."

play: Your contribution to Castlevania has left an indelible mark on anyone who has played it. All of your Castlevania music, from the most simplistic to the grandeur of Symphony of the Night (the best music ever put to a video game) is simply divine. Are you sticking to the series' spiritual and Gothic orchestral roots this time out?

Michiru Yamane: Thank you very much for your comments. "Simply divine"—it's such a great honor for me. As you mentioned, spiritual and Gothic orchestral music is inevitable for Castlevania music composition. Orchestra itself is inevitable for my music expression, too; it's very familiar to me and it's something I can put my emotions into it.

With this project, I have aimed more somberness and divinity into the orchestral sound, as well as going back to elements from Symphony of the Night, such as using actual guitar sound. I came up with something new for the Castlevania music that players can enjoy and get excited about.

Has the new, broader design inspired your score in any way?

I admit that the whole game concept made to a broader audience influenced my vision for composition. But at the same time, I always think to myself how the audience would react to my music.

Considering the fact that Castlevania has been played by many, many gamers worldwide (in Japan, U.S., Europe and recently in Korea was well), I do my best to pull out information from the development team as well as each territory's marketing staff...and consider what kind of music style, rhythm and harmony are suitable for Castlevania.

Do you write your music based on visual milestones as the game development progresses or create many separate pieces based on the overall treatment to merge with the game once it's complete?

I start to compose [from] whatever the development team has for the game visually. Even if they don't have anything to work from, I start my work as soon as my music idea or image is made—and brush up the soundtrack at each milestone.

Anything in particular you can share with Castlevania fans waiting to hear your latest opus?

Right now, we are considering the use of a vocal soundtrack for the new Castlevania, but I really don't have any detailed information as of now. We'll keep you posted with news on this! **play**



Painting: Ayami Kojima



In 2004, as publishers continued to strike a balance between original content and sequels, we continued to reap the benefits. With brands like Halo, GTA, Jak and Daxter and MGS on the one side and future hopefuls like Fable, Blood Will Tell, Ghosthunter, Red Dead Revolver, Ghost in the Shell, Kingdom Under Fire and Psi-Ops on the other, 2004 was a banner year for diversity. With the dawn of 2005, we're already beginning to see patterns emerge with certain companies poised to carry the torch for innovation and new brands, while others prepare to drop the next wave of titanic sequels and licenses. Together with the introduction of the PSP and DS and the promise of new hardware announcements just over the horizon, we find ourselves once again in a grand transition... '05 should be a

Action

game of the year

Nominees

Otogi 2 Sega **Xbox**
Viewtiful Joe 2 Capcom **PS2, GC**
Sonic Heroes Sega **PS2, Xbox, GC**
Ninja Gaiden Tecmo **Xbox**
Maximo vs. Army of Zin Capcom **PS2**

Ninja Gaiden

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox



Itagaki certainly took his time about it, but Ninja Gaiden was everything it was cracked up to be and more. Aside from being the perfect action game in nearly every way—save for the inventory system, which requires a pause, and the absence of dual analog control—what a lot of us didn't expect was for it to be as rock-hard as (if not rock harder than) its 8-bit predecessors—a risky endeavor in today's climate. In fact, if not for its mind-meltingly gorgeous cinemas, character models and environments, most would have quit the game early on and headed for the return line. Ninja Gaiden is that hard, but it's that good.

"Itagaki certainly took his time about it, but Ninja Gaiden was everything it was cracked up to be and more."

Platform

game of the year

Nominees

Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal Sony **PS2**
Sly 2: Band of Thieves Sony **PS2**
Jak 3 Sony **PS2**
Blinx 2 Microsoft **Xbox**
Crash Twinsanity VU Games **Xbox**

Jak 3

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Tough, tough category this year…Ratchet, Blinx 2 and especially Sly 2 are all superb adventure/platformers, and Twinsanity is a fantastic pure act/plat experience (especially on Xbox); those who didn't like it either didn't play through or have no business playing action games. Nevertheless, ND did the unthinkable with Jak 3, creating a 20-hour-long game that evolved for the duration…without loading. Simply amazing. Jak 3 was to be my game of the year if not for yet another forgettable soundtrack and the overbearing presence of Daxter, the series' Achilles' heel from day one. They should have chilled him this time out, especially given the ending, which, considering the last boss and dual mega-twists, is among the best in gaming. Begin anew with Allish, I say!

"…ND did the unthinkable with Jak 3, creating a 20-hour-long game that evolved for the duration…"







Adventure

game of the year

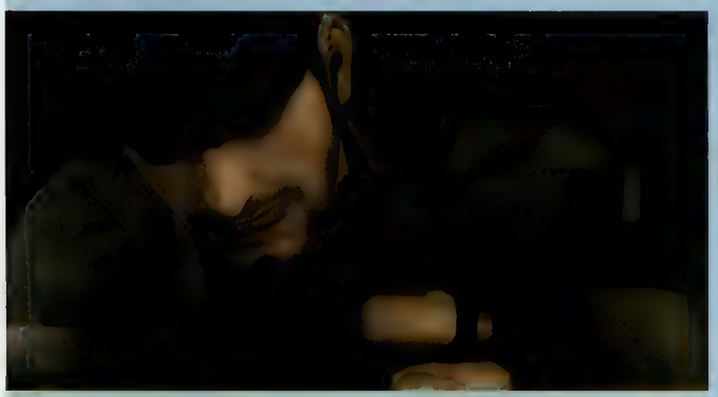
Nominees

Galleon Atlus **Xbox**
Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay VU Games **Xbox**
Ghost in the Shell: SAC Bandai **PS2**
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater Konami **PS2**
Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy Midway **PS2, Xbox**

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Developer: KCE Japan // Publisher: Konami // System: PlayStation 2

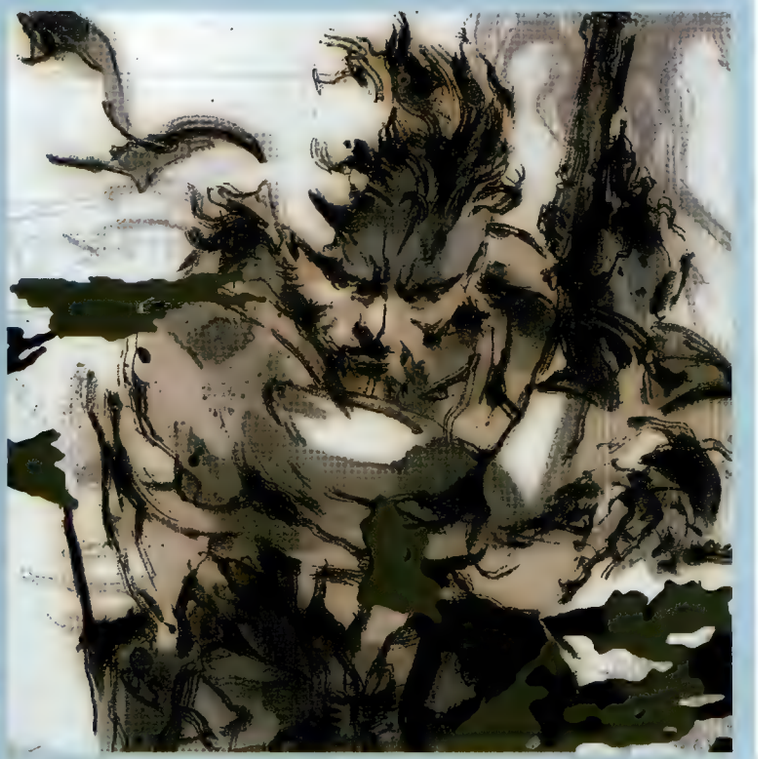
Hideo Kojima has done it again. With the new setting, new characters, new features and new gameplay direction, there was some question as to how Metal Gear Solid 3 would stack up to previous Metal Gear games, but in most ways, it's actually surpassed them. A masterpiece of storytelling and stealthy gameplay, every aspect of Snake Eater continues to build until the vicious climax. The expansive Cold War-era world begs to be explored, and even though edge-of-your-seat stealth is the emphasis, all of Snake's combat skills and arsenal of weapons open a wealth of gameplay possibilities. Exceptional aesthetics and innovative mechanics—such as treating wounds and catching food—are woven beautifully into the gameplay to help complete this incredible experience.



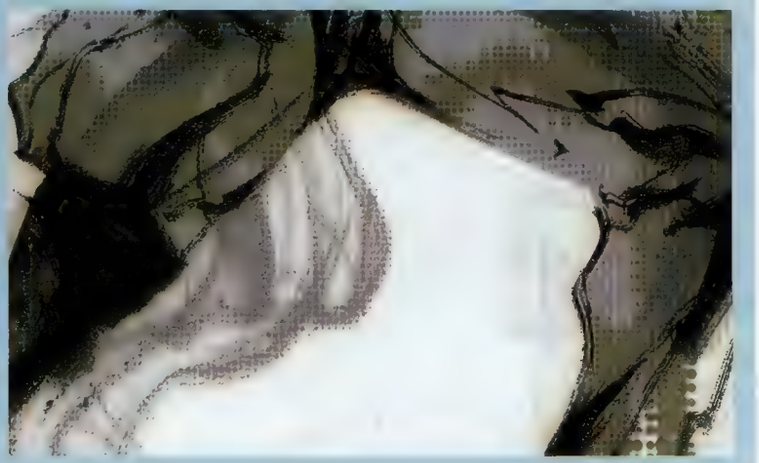








"Exceptional aesthetics and innovative mechanics...are woven beautifully into the gameplay to help complete this incredible experience."



Action-RPG

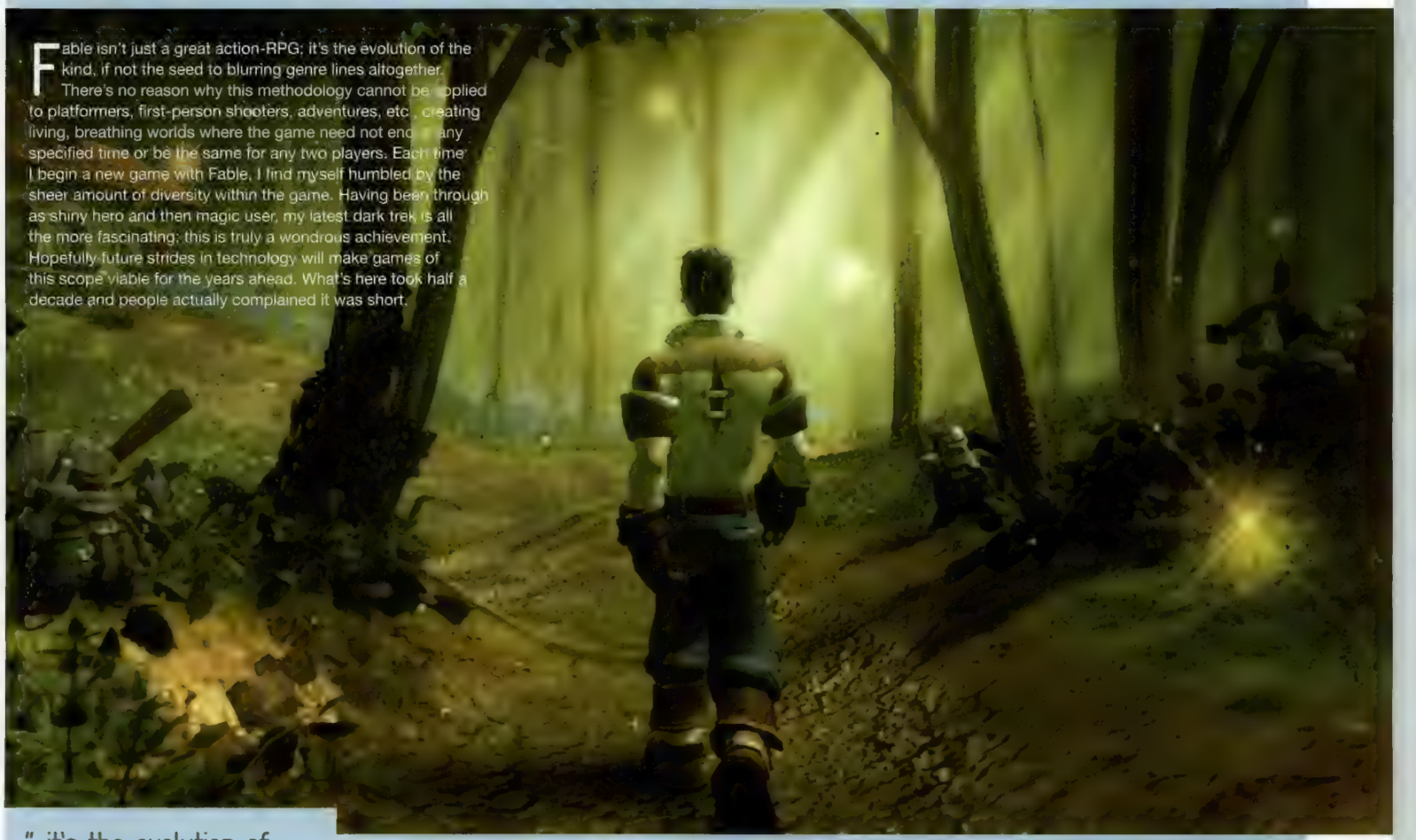
game of the year

Nominees

Fable Microsoft **Xbox**
The Bard's Tale VU Games **PS2, Xbox**
.hack part 4 // Quarantine Bandai **PS2**
Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles Nintendo **GC**
Zelda: Four Swords Adventures Nintendo **GC**

Fable

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox



Fable isn't just a great action-RPG; it's the evolution of the kind, if not the seed to blurring genre lines altogether. There's no reason why this methodology cannot be applied to platformers, first-person shooters, adventures, etc., creating living, breathing worlds where the game need not end at any specified time or be the same for any two players. Each time I begin a new game with Fable, I find myself humbled by the sheer amount of diversity within the game. Having been through as shiny hero and then magic user, my latest dark trek is all the more fascinating; this is truly a wondrous achievement. Hopefully future strides in technology will make games of this scope viable for the years ahead. What's here took half a decade and people actually complained it was short.

"...it's the evolution of the kind, if not the seed to blurring genre lines altogether."





First-Person Shooter

game of the year

Nominees

Halo 2 Microsoft **Xbox**
Metroid Prime 2 Echoes Nintendo **GC**
Call of Duty: Finest Hour Activision **Xbox**
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2 Ubisoft **Xbox**
Men of Valor VU Games **Xbox**

Halo 2

Developer: Bungie // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

The first-person shooter may not always hit full throttle on console, but not all first-person shooters are Halo 2. If hype is anything to go by, Halo 2 was to be the best game ever plopped into a console tray. As reality would have it, the game was undeniably the triumph of first-person shooters, if not quite what we wanted it to be. Even when you question Halo 2's final achievements, there's just no looking past the incredible gameplay scenarios, the epic presentation, the scope of the battles and immense spread of its world. You pick up the game time and time again, jump into its masterfully crafted Live sections, and you instantly feel something beyond the competition.

"You pick up the game time and time again, jump into its masterfully crafted Live sections, and you instantly feel something beyond the competition."



Role-Playing

game of the year

Nominees

Shadow Hearts: Covenant Midway **PS2**
Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne Atlus **PS2**
Tales of Symphonia Namco **GC**
Paper Mario: Thousand Year Door Nintendo **GC**
Star Wars: KOTOR II LucasArts **Xbox**

Star Wars: KOTOR II

Developer: Obsidian // Publisher: LucasArts // System: Xbox

KOTOR II might not have knocked our socks off graphically this year, but there wasn't an RPG as in-depth and solid as this one was. The gripping storyline was packed with interesting side-quests, and the main storyline kept its fair share of twists and turns. Musically, KOTOR II was grandiose and moody, bringing a true feeling of anticipation while we saved the galaxy. The weapon upgrade and combat systems were streamlined and sleeker than the first, and Obsidian and LucasArts brought in the big guns with their influence system. When our influenced characters started falling with us to the dark side, we could tell visually...plus there's no better feeling than taking the people we love along with us to the dark side.



Online

game of the year

Nominees

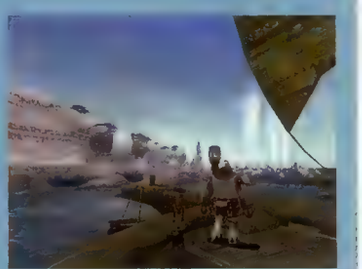
Halo 2 Microsoft **Xbox**
Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal Sony **PS2**
Dead or Alive Ultimate Tecmo **Xbox**
Final Fantasy XI Online Sony **PS2**
MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf Microsoft **Xbox**

Final Fantasy XI Online

Developer: Square Enix // Publisher: Sony // System: PS2

Square Enix's first online role-playing game proved to be a stout effort indeed, offering a very addictive massively multiplayer experience that worked seemlessly between PlayStation 2 and PC. The game's balance no doubt rewarded patience over quick thrills, but there was deep satisfaction to be had in the world of Vana d'iel. A major update this year further expanded on the adventure, keeping this well-maintained game fresh after even hundreds of hours of play. Considering the genre, perhaps not exactly fresh, but at least without a coating of mildew...





Survival Horror

game of the year

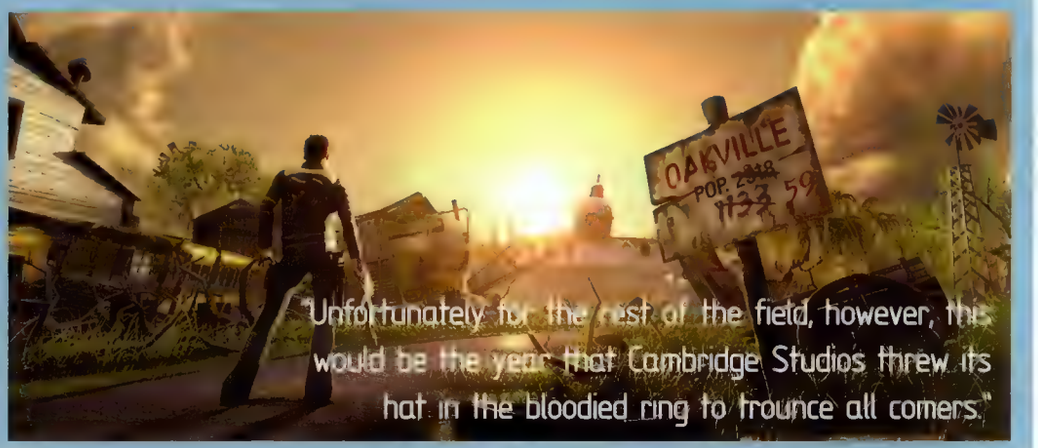
Nominees

Silent Hill 4: The Room Konami PS2
Fatal Frame 2: Director's Cut Tecmo Xbox
Ghosthunter Namco PS2
Siren Sony PS2
Kuon Agetec PS2

Ghosthunter

Developer: Cambridge Studios // Publisher: Namco // System: PlayStation 2

With the category more varied than ever, including haunts ranging from the vile, oddity-filled world of Silent Hill to the spine-tingling serenity of games like Kuon and Siren (although Japanese characters with Australian accents disturb me), 2004 was a good year for creeping about in video games. Unfortunately for the rest of the field, however, this would be the year that Cambridge Studios threw its hat in the bloodied ring to trounce all comers. The year's most underrated and misunderstood game (the masses never found it due to asinine accountings by selected outlets) packed some of the best realistic PS2 graphics ever into a superbly acted story within a game that, in my opinion, blows anything in the category far, far out of the water. If you missed it, go find one and see what your PS2 can really do.



Racing

game of the year

Nominees

MTX Mototrax Activision PS2, Xbox
Burnout 3 EA PS2, Xbox
Colin McRae Rally 2005 Codemasters Xbox
OutRun 2 Microsoft Xbox
Rallisport Challenge 2 Microsoft Xbox

Colin McRae Rally 2005

Developer: Codemasters // Publisher: Codemasters // System: Xbox

Had Gran Turismo 4 made its original launch date, you would probably be seeing that game being awarded racing game of the year, but in its absence, Colin McRae 2005 fills that spot with great distinction. Finally providing real-time online play and with further enhancements to the already superb physics and graphics engine, Colin McRae 2005 was everything the series has been working toward. What more can be done with this series on Xbox?



Shooter

game of the year

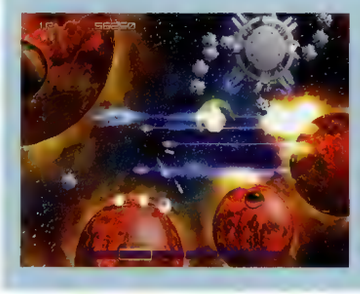
Nominees

Ace Combat 5 Namco PS2
Gradius V Konami PS2
Neo Contra Konami PS2
Alien Hominid O-3 PS2, GC
Metal Slug 3 SNK Neo Geo Xbox

Gradius V

Developer: Treasure/KCET // Publisher: Konami // System: PlayStation 2

Treasure took us back to the future with this awesome sequel to one of our favorite 2D shooter series. Dealing out cunning and addictive gameplay like candy from their pockets, Treasure tweaked the classic Gradius formula just enough to give them the freedom to design some of their trademark brilliance into the levels and enemy patterns. Plus they really delivered in the graphics department, offering up fantastically detailed and colored stages that featured a wonderful organic sequence and more stunning bosses than you deserve.





Strategy
game of the year

Nominees
Front Mission 4 Square Enix **PS2**
Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders Microsoft **Xbox**
Growlanser Generations Working Designs **PS2**
La Pucelle Tactics Mastiff **PS2**
Phantom Brave NIS America **PS2**

Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders

Developer: Phantagram // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

Not since Langrisser Millennium for the Dreamcast have I been this enamored with a game involving strategy. That was the first time I ever charged into battle controlling my own character in real time, and I was convinced it was the shape of things to come...it wasn't. I gave up begging publishers to pick it up about a year later and figured that was that. Enter Phantagram...not only have they perfected the kind—blessing us with real-time dominion over entire legions—but they've drenched it in high art and put it to a soundtrack that goes from ethereal bliss to bone-crunching metal. I love this game in an unnatural way and yearn for a sequel, although it is Microsoft, so I won't be holding my breath.

"...not only have they perfected the kind...but they've drenched it in high art and put it to a soundtrack that goes from ethereal bliss to bone-crunching metal."



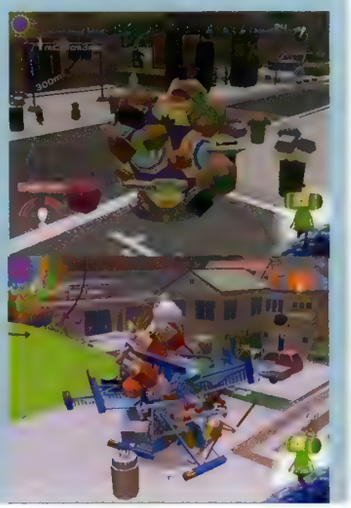
Alternative
game of the year

Nominees
Pikmin 2 Nintendo **GC**
Katamari Damacy Namco **PS2**
Anti-Grav Sony **PS2**
Mario Party 6 Nintendo **GC**
Sega Superstars Sega **PS2**

Katamari Damacy

Developer: Namco // Publisher: Namco // System: PlayStation 2

First reactions to Katamari Damacy usually consist of at least one, "What the hell kind of game IS this?" Well, it's a pristine example of how a simple and fun concept can be, yet keep anyone glued to their PS2 for weeks. Why? It's too easy to fall in love with Katamari, no matter how you slice it. Or roll it. Who knew rolling up stuff could be so much freakin' fun? It barreled through its own category and made people see weird Japanese games in a whole new light. Katamari rolled up all kinds of awards this year from media outlets everywhere, taking everyone by surprise. One thing's for sure: the King of Cosmos would be proud of this Katamari.



Rhythm
game of the year

Nominees
Dance Dance Revolution Extreme Konami **PS2**
Karaoke Revolution Vol. 3 Konami **PS2**
Taiko Drum Master Namco **PS2**
Technic Beat Mastiff **PS2**
Donkey Konga Nintendo **GC**

Donkey Konga

Developer: Namco // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube

No other beat game this year could outdo the sheer insanity that Donkey Konga provided. Sure, we've seen cool beat games with new tools (Samba de Amigo, anyone?) but Donkey Konga really took the cake this past year with its innovative bongo controller, cool shopping option and catchy tunes that kept your foot tapping when you were away from your GameCube. Nintendo proved that beat games can still be innovative without making things too hard on beginners, while providing enough challenge at Gorilla difficulty to keep beat aficionados coming back for more.



Fighting
game of the year

Mortal Kombat: Deception Midway PS2, Xbox
Guilty Gear Isuka Sammy PS2
Godzilla: Save the Earth Atari PS2, Xbox
Capcom Fighting Evolution Capcom PS2
Dead or Alive Ultimate Tecmo Xbox

Dead or Alive Ultimate

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox

DOA Ultimate polished DOA2 from the ground up and gave Xbox owners a chance to experience the original DOA untouched. This was one game that couldn't have been better for Team Ninja fans. Elaborate interactive backgrounds, enough outlandish costume changes to count on our fingers and toes (per player!) and a killer arcade-style online component brought DOAU head and shoulders above the rest. Where else could you walk into a virtual arcade, watch another pair of gamers duke it out, and then get in line yourself to challenge the champion? That's right, nowhere else, and that's what put DOAU on top of the list. Plus, those DOA girls are pretty easy on the eyes...



"Where else could you walk into a virtual arcade, watch another pair of gamers duke it out, and then get in line yourself to challenge the champion?"



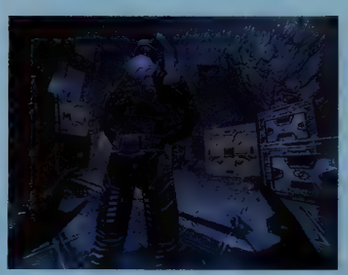
TV Show or Movie-based
game of the year

Nominees
Ghost in the Shell: SAC Bandai PS2
The Incredibles THQ PS2, Xbox, GC
Spider-Man 2 Activision PS2, Xbox, GC
The SpongeBob Movie THQ PS2, Xbox, GC
Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay VU Games Xbox

The Chronicles of Riddick

Developer: Starbreeze // Publisher: VU Games // System: Xbox

Chronicles of Riddick really had little to do with the movie on which it was based, other than the presence of Riddick, trapped in an inhospitable prison, fighting for escape. Perhaps this is ultimately the most sensible direction for a movie game? Its inspirations came from an original imagination, and the result was awesome. Developer Starbreeze came out of nowhere, crafting a tight story, stunning visuals, exciting shootouts hinging on stealthy progression, and a magnificently nasty setting that stuck with us like the machine-oil grind to the claustrophobic walls.





Revival
game of the year

Nominees
Classic NES Series: Legend of Zelda Nintendo GBA
Donkey Kong Country 2 Nintendo GBA
Mega Man Anniversary Collection Capcom PS2
Sonic Mega Collection Plus Sega PS2, Xbox
Midway Arcade Treasures 2 Midway PS2, Xbox, GC

Mega Man Anniversary Collection

Developer: Capcom/Atomic Planet // Publisher: Capcom // System: PS2

If Capcom had just decided to re-release, say Mega Man 2 or Mega Man 8, those games alone would have been probably been enough to snag some honors, but when you're talking 10 great Mega Man games in one package, it really doesn't get much better. Mega Man Anniversary Collection packs hours of challenging gameplay onto a single disc, letting us relive the fun of stealing enemy weapons and blasting through tricky obstacle-filled stages, reminding us why Capcom's blue hero has become so long-lived and so prolific. On top of all the great gameplay, MMAC even includes the enhancements of the Japanese PS1 re-releases, and some nice bonus content has been added. Too bad the GameCube version didn't turn out as well as the PS2 one, thanks to strangely reversed button assignments.



Special Achievement

individual excellence

Best graphics

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Developer: KCE Japan // Publisher: Konami // System: PlayStation 2

Whether indoor or outdoor, in the lush jungle or atop craggy peaks, whether you're talking character models or environments or vehicles, Metal Gear Solid 3 delivered the total visual package. No detail was overlooked in MGS3's visuals—intricately modeled foliage, the sunbeams poking through the canopy, the dust falling from the ceiling of a shack, the magazines strewn about an office, fish swimming through a stream. Character faces looked absolutely stunning, and textures were used in such a way that MGS3 felt more like a living, breathing place than just a game. Even the small animals that were fodder for Snake's survival were given meticulous detail and realistic animation.

Nominees



Best pre-rendered cinemas

Onimusha 3

Developer: Capcom // Publisher: Capcom // System: PlayStation 2

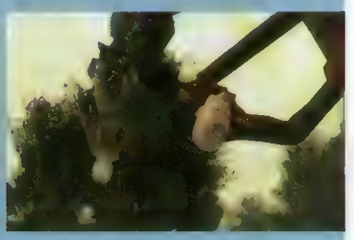


Capcom has always wowed us with their prerendered cinematics, and Onimusha 3 is no exception—easily their most highly produced, detailed, rousing production yet. Producer Keiji Inafune once boasted that we would witness CG of a new order with Onimusha 3, and you could argue he was right. There was a feature-film quality to the technique and quality of the lengthy opening stretch, which almost made the actual in-game footage seem slight and boring in comparison. With big-screen productions making game CG feel increasingly obsolete, dull and amateurish, Onimusha 3 stood boldly at the front of the pack with undeniably unmatched results.

Nominees **Ninja Gaiden** Tecmo **Xbox / Onimusha 3: Demon Siege** Capcom **PS2 / Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams** THQ **PS2, Xbox, GC / Prince of Persia: Warrior Within** Ubisoft **PS2, Xbox, GC / Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex** Bandai **PS2**

Best real-time cinemas

Metal Gear Solid 3



The real-time cutscenes in Metal Gear Solid 3 truly brought the action and drama of the game to life thanks to unusually masterful use of cinematic technique and some absolutely stunning visuals. From Snake's initial HALO jump to the treachery-filled ending, MGS3's cinematics brought an emotional, visceral lift to the game that the gameplay alone could not have provided. Kojima and his team keenly understand the language of film, and more importantly, how to elegantly orchestrate the cinematic beats into the game world. As the action visually unfolded, ratcheting up the tension, the anticipation to jump in and take control was uncontainable.

Nominees

Best lighting/textures

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

Developer: Starbreeze // Publisher: VU Games // System: Xbox

often get enough attention. One look at Chronicles of Riddick's illuminated world and you see a depth and sense of dimension few games even attempt. From the characters to the prison halls to the stacked junk and patrolling machines thrown in Riddick's path, every little detail became immensely more convincing. You patrolled what felt like an actual space, not just nice-looking graphics layered into levels. It's not often you sneak through an open door, only to notice you've been detected thanks to an unexpected stream of light sneaking in behind you. .

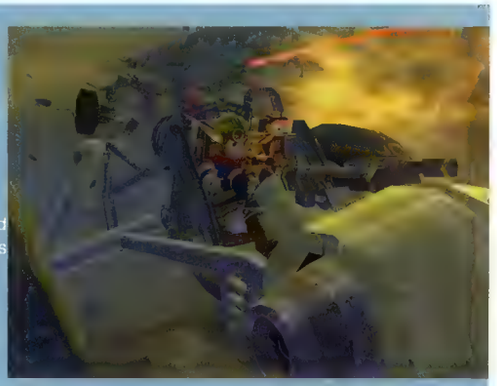
Nominees



Best animation

Jak 3

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2



Aside from Jak's rubbery slick movement and millisecond reactions (the best since Shiny's perfection of the kind on 16-bit with Earthworm Jim), Jak 3's resident minions are all painstakingly animated and the real-time cinemas stand as a high-water mark that no one has even approached. Not only are they seamlessly integrated into the game, but each movement is animated for the moment, sans repetitious idles or anything not matching the scene. The cast of Jak 3 is the closest thing we have to virtual real-time actors, and we never have to wait for them to load...ever. It doesn't hurt that they're also some of the best designed in the history of platformers either.

Nominees

Best character design



Susumu Matsushita for Maximo vs. Army of Zin

Developer: Capcom Digital Studio // Publisher: Capcom // System: PS2

There's simply no denying the amazing gifts of Susumu Matsushita, renowned cover artist for the most respected video game magazine in the world, Japan's Famitsu. Aside from Famitsu covers and his contributions to gaming (including Elfaria for SNES, Tusk and Willy Wombat for Sega Saturn, Motor Toon GP for PS and both Maximos on which he also oversaw feel), Matsushita is also known for his work in TV, designs for sports teams and his advertisements throughout Japan. His unmistakable style comes through in Army of Zin by way of the mechanized clockwork ghouls that surround his cast of busty maidens, traders, villains, mutants and, of course, the unmistakable Maximo, heir to the throne of Ghosts 'n Goblins' Sir Arthur.

Nominees



Best control

Ninja Gaiden

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox

Like everything judged here, control is a very subjective thing. Going beyond the bare skeleton of the code that drives it, a game with good control overwhelms the synthetic barrier and simply feels good in the hand. If this were easy to accomplish all games would have good and satisfying control. This makes Ninja Gaiden even more extraordinary. It not only feels incredible in the hand, but the depth and level of dexterity that is required and rewarded is simply beyond the reach of any other game this year.

Nominees **Ninja Gaiden** Tecmo **Xbox / Jak 3** Sony **PS2 / Prince of Persia: Warrior Within** Ubisoft **PS2, Xbox, GC / Sly 2: Band of Thieves** Sony **PS2 / Maximo vs. Army of Zin** Capcom **PS2**

Best level design

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal // Publisher: Ubisoft // System: PS2, Xbox, GC

Say what you will about the combat in Prince of Persia: Warrior Within; the real achievement stood in the sophisticated level design. Passage through the complex rooms often took a long pause for observation before tackling a path toward the exit. Coming to grips with the inventively complex structures was far removed from the approach we might take in most adventure games, where durable jumps and linear thinking often carve the path. Not only did Prince's designers forge visually interesting levels, but they demanded acrobatic moves and extended sessions of quick reflexes to tackle—sometimes after entire chunks were cleverly rearranged.

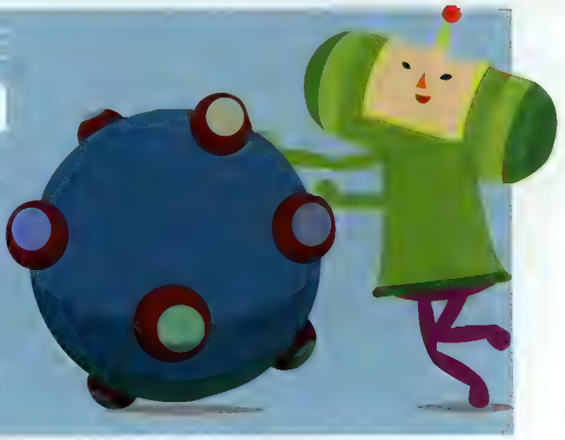
Nominees



Most innovative gameplay

Katamari Damacy

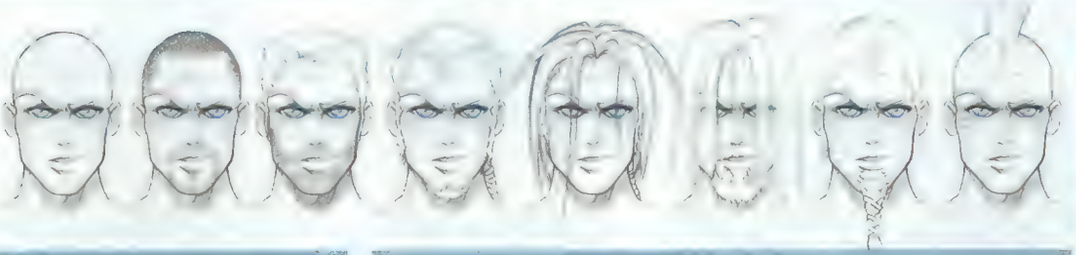
Developer: Namco // Publisher: Namco // System: PlayStation 2



Katamari Damacy's gameplay [illegible] strange, but once you got used to it, you were hooked. Then, nobody was satisfied just rolling up cookies and fu. We wanted people, we wanted skyscrapers, we wanted the continents…and we took them. The controls offered no buttons, only analog sticks. Anyone and everyone played this game, and its brilliance lies in its simplicity. No amount of Prozac can help you if you don't feel pure unadulterated joy whilst playing Katamari Damacy. And don't even get us started on the theme song…there have been way too many times we've caught ourselves singing that catchy tune.

Nominees

[illegible] Nintendo DS



Most innovative technology

Nintendo DS



Was there really any other choice for most innovative use of technology in 2004? Just as Nintendo promised, the DS isn't just a new system—it's a new way to play video games. The touch screen is really the most revolutionary feature here, letting players touch, poke and rub their way through new kinds of gaming experiences and interface with some returning favorites in whole new ways, and the voice recognition and dual screens also offer an all-new kind of fun. Look no further than games like Sega's Feel the Magic to see just how unique the DS can be—just prepare for some weird looks when you start yelling into your handheld.

Nominees

[illegible]

Best original score

Russel Shaw for Fable

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

Residing behind the Fable intro theme, composed by Danny Elfman and mixed by Dennis Sands, rests a soundtrack—composed by Russell Shaw—that plays in kind, as if Elfman were along for the entire ride. Music is as vital an element in the Fable gene pool as the visuals themselves, a make-or-break component, working as a device for us to soak in the wonder of the journey, from cresting a dawn-soaked precipice amidst a wooded swamp to living each town to battling the game's endless array of fiends and behemoths. No game can aspire to greatness without the perfect soundtrack—a fact that Fable's creators took to heart amidst a generation of games that, for the most part, have forgotten about the art of noise.

Nominees

[illegible]

Best use of sound

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Developer: KCE Japan // Publisher: Konami // System: PlayStation 2

Many games can claim to have exquisite sound, but none made audio as integral a part of the experience as did Metal Gear Solid 3. Using Dolby Pro Logic II surround sound, MGS3 truly immersed players into its gripping universe, not only through ambient sound, but also through audio cues that could mean the difference between getting the jump on an enemy or walking blindly into their ambush. The audio design was honed to the point that enemies could be accurately located through sound, making it more important than sight in many encounters. Aside from these gameplay repercussions, MGS3 also has simply great effects and voicework.

Nominees

[illegible]

Best original character

You (Fable)

Dev: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox



Yeah, you couldn't be a girl, but who cares? Playing as ourselves in a video game got way cooler this year with the release of Fable. Tattoos, hairstyles, weight gain/loss and your affinity for good (or evil) makes for one ass-kicking hero (or villain). If we're taking candy from little kids and pushing old ladies around, we want to look scary, and Fable gave us that opportunity. Big Blue Box, Lionhead and Microsoft made us realize that we didn't need some cookie-cutter hero to lead us into a contrived story…all we needed was a little imagination and a lot of personality. Bring on the mutton chops!

Nominees

[illegible]

Voice acting

Vin Diesel for Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

Developer: Starbreeze // Publisher: VU Games // System: Xbox

Just because a game contains famous actors for its voice acting doesn't mean quality is to follow. And just because a voice actor is normally talented doesn't mean they're right for the part. Vin Diesel—he hit every note playing himself, perfectly matched to the roiling, imprisoned Riddick. All gravelly and subtly emotive and attentively delivered, Diesel's Riddick took the game to even higher ground—a memorable accomplishment in a sea of way-off voice talent that invariably diminished the otherwise quality of the competition.

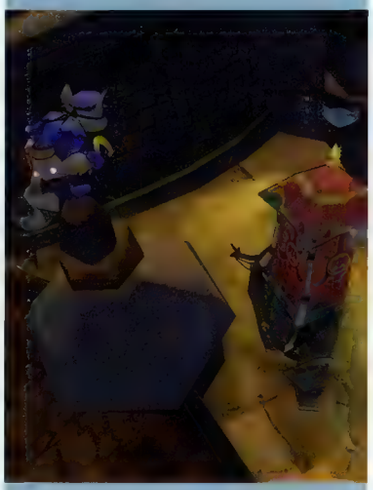
Nominees



3-D camera design

Sly 2: Band of Thieves

Publisher: Sony // System: PS2



Since the dawn of 3D, the sorest spot among reviewers and consumers has been over camera issues. Mario hired a cameraman (er, turtle) to follow him all over his 3D debut and people still complained. The folks at Sucker Punch have done a superb job within a very complex game with their Thevius sequel, floating an invertible "free" camera around three distinctly different characters. Outdoors, the view is perfection, and indoors, unavoidable tight spots are quickly rectified using Sly's on-the-fly binoculars to get your bearings. The way the circle button affixes Sly to high wires and such was another stroke of genius—brilliant game design all around.

Nominees

Best writing

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II

Developer: Obsidian // Publisher: LucasArts // System: Xbox

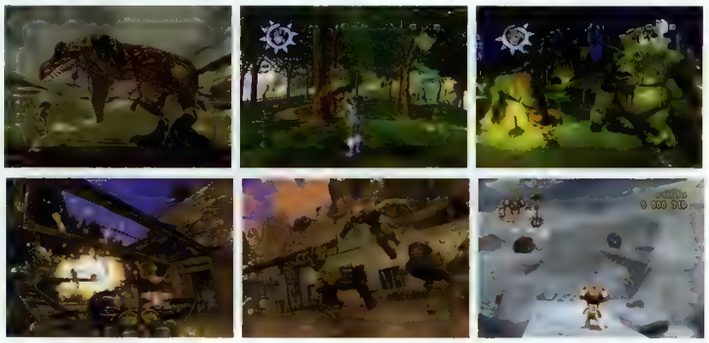
Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords brought one heck of a rollercoaster ride in its story...and made us like it. The interweaving of 10 party members' lives, along with the side-quests of numerous people and your main character's epic tale made for such a stellar telling of a story, we couldn't ignore it. The voice work was nearly flawless, conveying a story with brilliant personalities for each individual character, and the writing was excellent, proving that KOTOR II could not only equal its predecessor, but surpass it. From beginning to end, The Sith Lords brought this carefully crafted story that never felt bland or contrived. Good ol' Mr. Lucas should take notes.

Nominees

Biggest disappointment

Micro-mis-management

Microsoft's delays, cancellations and just plain bad business among boutique developers and name brands alike makes the scourged Nintendo of old look like a church convent. Last year, Vince—the best original platform character since Mario—was badly squandered, and as a result the amazing Beep Industries disbanded; this year Psychonauts, Tork and Oddworld: SW were all kicked to the curb in the latter stages of development (causing a chain reaction I'd need pages to elaborate on), and their own BC, True Fantasy and Kameo have all either been delayed or, worse, cancelled. And where's our Rare!? If they sacrificed the best platformers around to boost their stock, then what's with nixing Kameo? It's friggin' brilliant!! I know; I played it plenty. If Conker gets messed with, we march!



Most anticipated 2005

The Legend of Zelda (working title)

Developer: Nintendo // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube



Tamazing Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, and others that are already out in stores—but none made our collective jaws drop like the new Legend of Zelda for GameCube. Wind Waker was fantastic, but the new Zelda is poised to be even better, giving demanding gamers a more mature Link (similar to the one from Ocarina of Time) and a beautiful-beyond-words graphical style to match, along with new techniques like swordplay on horseback. The fact that Nintendo's demo was all real-time gameplay running on actual 'Cube hardware made the announcement that much sweeter. We just hope Nintendo keeps their word and delivers it on GC this year as promised.

Nominees

Handheld Best 10

small games, big fun

2004 proved to be an exciting year for handheld gaming. The Game Boy Advance once again dominated thanks to some of its best titles yet—in no small part to the 2D prowess of the masterminds at Treasure (garnering awards at the #1 and #4 position). But more importantly, this past November saw the release of Nintendo's hotly anticipated DS and December marked the Japanese release the super-cool PSP. 2005 will assuredly see these beasts hit their stride and redefine the mobile experience, but for the time being, we can bask in the warm, reflective glow of the current king of handheld gaming.

10 Shining Force: Resurrection of the Dark Dragon

Developer: Amusement Vision // Publisher: Atlus // System: Game Boy Advance

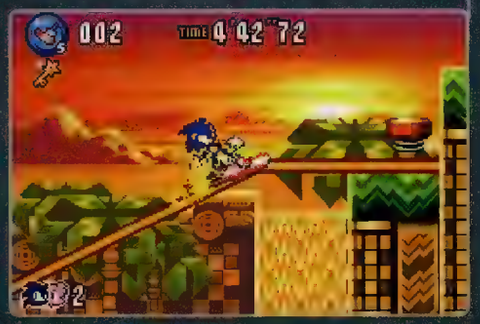
Shining Force is one of the games that helped define the strategy-RPG genre many years ago, and it's still one of the best. In fact, with new scenarios, new characters and enhanced visuals, this version is even better. Grid-based battling is rarely so addictive. Shining Force just narrowly edged out another classic RPG revival to take this spot, that being Final Fantasy I & II: Dawn of Souls.



09 Sonic Advance 3

Developer: Sonic Team // Publisher: THQ // System: Game Boy Advance

Sega's blue blur rarely fails to deliver, and the package that arrived on GBA this year is arguably the best 2D Sonic since Sonic CD more than a decade ago. The level design especially helped propel this installment into the stratosphere, as multiple paths let players explore to their hearts' content or just charge through levels in a blaze of glory. The new tag-team system and themed worlds were also top-notch.



08 Mario vs. Donkey Kong

Developer: Nintendo Software Technologies // Publisher: Nintendo // System: Game Boy Advance

Even in the confines of small, puzzle-like levels, the genius of Nintendo game design shines brightly in Mario vs. Donkey Kong. Part of its beauty lies in such simplicity, as the brilliant arrangement of obstacles, enemies and switches lead to fiendish challenges and addictive gameplay. Mario's many moves kept the game constantly engaging, and the cutscenes were incredible for GBA.

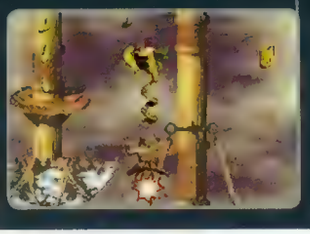


07 Donkey Kong Country 2

Developer: Rare // Publisher: Nintendo // System: Game Boy Advance

We've gone from heralding Rare's 2D revelations on 16-bit as pinnacles of the kind to playing them on tiny handheld carts in a relatively short span of time, rendering DKC 2 one fresh banana. Where other 2D rebirths sputter, DKC 2 shines brighter than ever since its integrity remains, for the most part, the benchmark for the genre; it simply never got much better than this. Regardless, Rare's combination of cranky satire, supporting beasts and impeccable pattern-based platforming is, and will forever be, timeless.





06 Shaman King: Master of Spirits

Developer: KCE Japan // Publisher: Konami // System: Game Boy Advance

The world went without a new Castlevania game this year, but instead we got the next-best thing: Shaman King. Whether you're familiar with the anime or not, there's no argument that hero Yoh makes a fine Belmont substitute, and the myriad of powers he obtains from various spirits open the way to a fantastically sprawling adventure. The swordplay is great, and it looks and sounds excellent.

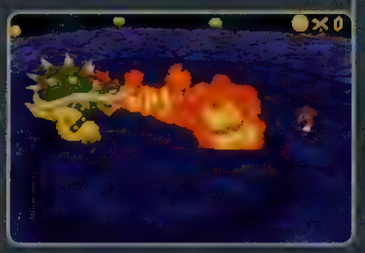




05 Super Mario 64 DS

Developer: Nintendo // Publisher: Nintendo // System: Nintendo DS

Not long ago, players never would have even dreamed of playing this defining moment in 3D platforming on a handheld system, yet here it is, and in some ways even better than before. While the game primarily recreates the revolutionary gameplay of the N64 original in fine form, this version goes even further with new levels, multiple characters, versus competition and loads of very fun touch-screen minigames.

04 Advance Guardian Heroes

Developer: Treasure // Publisher: Ubisoft // System: Game Boy Advance

For years, fans of the Saturn classic had yearned for a sequel to Guardian Heroes, and those wishes were finally granted on GBA. AGH returns players to a magical land of swords and sorcery, continuing the story that started in the original, letting players revisit old friends like Serena and Han and pummel that smug look off Zur's face once again. AGH had even more technique than the original, and the multiplayer gameplay is a blast.




03 Metal Slug Advance

Developer: SNK Playmore // Publisher: SNK Neo Geo USA // System: GBA

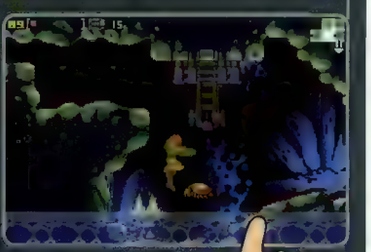
A fantastic installment of a fantastic series, Metal Slug Advance brought all the blistering action and old-school charm of SNK's shoot-'em-up onto the GBA in excellent form. From the jungles to subterranean caves to the heart of the enemy base, MSA was packed end-to-end with explosive weaponry and even more explosive bosses, upgraded for the GBA with features like collectible cards and secret areas. MSA is sheer adrenaline-pumping intensity.




02 Metroid: Zero Mission

Developer: Nintendo // Publisher: Nintendo // System: Game Boy Advance

Leave it to Nintendo to take a great game and make it even better. Metroid: Zero Mission takes the fantastic formula of the original NES Metroid—the exploration, the labyrinthine design, the incredible weapons—and thoroughly enhances it for modern audiences. The result is a game that's even bigger, deeper and more fun than the original, with vastly improved controls and a whole new area to explore. A remake of Metroid II would be awesome.

01 Handheld Game of the Year
Astro Boy: Omega Factor

Developer: Treasure/Hitmaker // Publisher: Sega // System: Game Boy Advance

Only the masters at Treasure could create a 2D extravaganza like Astro Boy: Omega Factor. Bursting with technique and challenge, Astro Boy was a throwback to game design of days gone by in the best way possible, not only honoring one of Japan's most beloved characters by faithfully recreating all of his abilities, but doing it in a way that incorporated masterful level design, amazing pattern-based bosses and one of the best stories in recent memory. This wasn't just the best handheld game of 2004—it's one of the best games of the year, period.



PC Year in Review

premium computing

List compiled by Mike Griffin

Unless you spent the last year chillin' inside a cryogenic tube, you know that 2004 was pretty amazing for PC gaming. We witnessed the bomb dropping that was Far Cry, ushering in the next generation of real-time shader technology months before the other big-shot FPS titles arrived. We had a couple of incredible RTS efforts with Rome: Total War and Battle for Middle Earth. A handful of superior console ports also made a great impression. It was a breakout year for massively multiplayer games, as the genre finally embraced both casual and hardcore players with must-try online experiences like World of Warcraft and City of Heroes. The most influential releases of the year might be the extraordinary combo-punch of expert design delivered by Doom 3 and Half-Life 2. In general, thanks to enormous advances in technology, PC gaming enjoyed a period of untouchable hardware supremacy—free of the usual constraints that consoles experience as they reach their late generation apex.

Best FPS

Half-Life 2

Developer: Valve // Publisher: VU Games

Half-Life 2 matches the campaign grandeur of the original game with deft pacing and Source engine power, resulting in an epic single-player experience that no other PC first-person shooter can touch.



Nominees

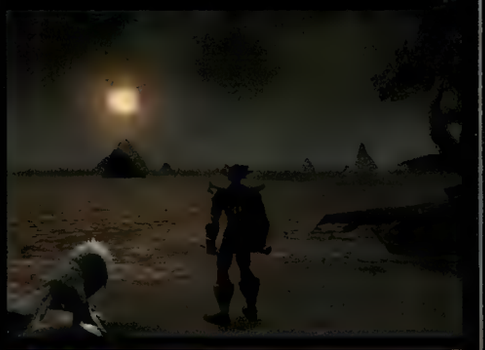
- Half-Life 2 **Valve**
- Doom 3 **Activision**
- Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay **VU Games**
- Far Cry **Ubisoft**

Best RPG

World of Warcraft

Developer: Blizzard // Publisher: VU Games

It was a thin year for RPGs on PC. As an online-only title, World of Warcraft certainly isn't a traditional winner in this category. Nonetheless, WoW provides a fantastic serving of genre requisites—huge lands, fun quests and serious character building—that virtually *any* RPG fan would covet.



Nominees

- World of Warcraft **VU Games**
- Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines **Activision**
- City of Heroes **NCsoft**

Best Action or Adventure

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal // Publisher: Ubisoft

Get a quality controller (or better yet, a console pad adapter) and plug yourself into the PC version of PoP: Warrior Within. The great action and level design of Ubisoft's impressive sequel looks beautiful in high-res.

Nominees

- Prince of Persia: Warrior Within **Ubisoft**
- Sonic Heroes **Sega**
- Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow **Ubisoft**
- Thief: Deadly Shadows **Eidos**

Best RTS

Rome: Total War

Developer: Creative Assembly // Publisher: Activision

Rome: Total War is 2004's best RTS title. Activision and The Creative Assembly absolutely nailed large-scale production values, battlefield dynamics and excellent strategic map gameplay.



Nominees

- Rome: Total War **Activision**
- Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle Earth **Electronic Arts**
- Ground Control 2 **VU Games/NDA Productions**
- Warhammer 40k: Dawn of War **THQ**

Special Class/Alternative

The Sims 2

Developer: Maxis // Publisher: Electronic Arts

The Sims 2 proves to be an irresistible sequel, destined to hold millions of players in its addictive grasp for months at a time.

Nominees

- The Sims 2 **Electronic Arts**
- Sid Meier's Pirates! **Atari**
- Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 **Atari**
- Myst IV: Revelation **Ubisoft**

Best Racing

Colin McRae Rally 2005

Developer: Codemasters // Publisher: Codemasters

Colin McRae Rally 2005 is the most refined game in the series thus far. The racing physics are great—solid and satisfying—and the PC version looks stunning with the highest detail settings enabled.

Nominees

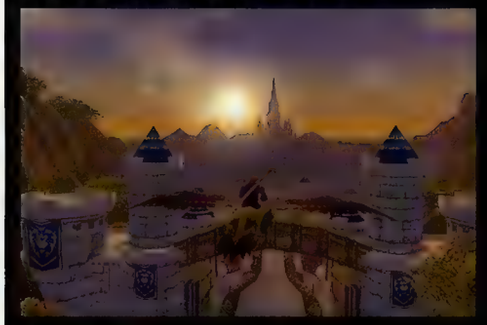
- Colin McRae Rally 2005 **Codemasters**
- Need for Speed Underground 2 **Electronic Arts**
- TOCA Race Driver 2 **Codemasters**
- TrackMania **Enlight**

Best Multiplayer-Massive

World of Warcraft

Developer: Blizzard // Publisher: VU Games

The top PC RPG of 2004 is also the best massively multiplayer online title available. Though a few key features missed release (the PvP Battlegrounds, for one), World of Warcraft still dominates the massive online genre for the right reasons: It's high on intuitive progression and low on tedium. Whether you're new to the genre or a veteran, and whether or not you're familiar with the Warcraft universe (or any fantasy lore, for that matter), WoW is so eminently playable and well crafted it is certain to appeal on some fundamental level.



Nominees

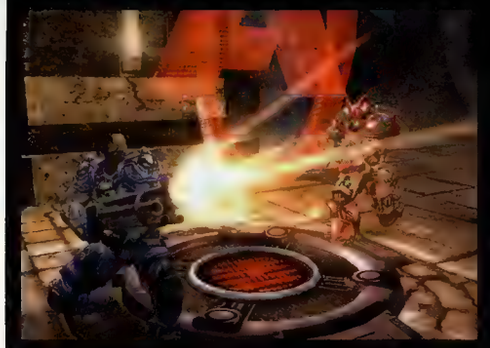
- World of Warcraft **VU Games**
- City of Heroes **NCsoft**
- EverQuest 2 **Sony Online Entertainment**
- Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed **LucasArts**

Best Multiplayer-Action

Unreal Tournament 2004

Developer: Epic Games // Publisher: Atari

Each game in this category is an accomplished first-person action experience played by hundreds of thousands of gamers worldwide, but only UT 2004 offers such a staggering amount of great playable content driven by a thoroughbred multiplayer engine.



Nominees

- Unreal Tournament 2004 **Atari**
- Counter-Strike: Source **Valve**
- Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising **NovaLogic**
- Battlefield Vietnam **Electronic Arts**

Achievement in PC Visuals

Doom 3

Developer: id Software // Publisher: Activision

While Half-Life 2 and Far Cry use frighteningly powerful engines and both games look terrific, and though Riddick on PC is gorgeous with its improved graphics, no other game in 2004 advanced PC visuals as dramatically as id's Doom 3. With its incomparable lighting and shading, amazing creature models and wickedly stylized futuristic setting, Doom 3 is the pinnacle of graphics evolution on PC.

Nominees

- Doom 3 **Activision**
- Half-Life 2 **VU Games**
- Far Cry **Ubisoft**
- Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay **VU Games**

Achievement in PC Sound

Doom 3 & Half Life 2 (tie)

Developer: id Software // Publisher: Activision

Developer: Valve // Publisher: VU Games

Doom 3's rumbling ambient score ties for 2004's best achievement in PC sound, as it conspires with phenomenal visuals to create a truly foreboding atmosphere. Sharing the podium is Half-Life 2; Valve's masterful sequel boasts pounding combat tunes and great voicework and foley for every character and weapon. The sound design in both of these blockbuster shooters would not be out of place in a big action flick.

Nominees

- Doom 3 **Activision**
- Half-Life 2 **VU Games**
- Call of Duty: United Offensive **Activision**
- EverQuest 2 **Sony Online Entertainment**

Most Anticipated PC Game 2005

F.E.A.R.

Developer: Monolith // Publisher: VU Games

The minds at Monolith that brought you No One Lives Forever 2 and Tron 2.0 are preparing a supernatural special ops shooter with a powerful horror theme. F.E.A.R. will fuse high-tech military action with the moves of *The Matrix* and the brooding terror of *The Ring*.

Nominees

- F.E.A.R. **VU Games**
- Serious Sam 2 **CroTeam (Publisher TBA)**
- Dragon Age **BioWare (Publisher TBA)**
- Guild Wars **NCsoft**

PC Gear (Best bang for buck)

BFG GeForce 6800 GT OC

Quality PC gaming can be a costly endeavor. These goods are 2004's performance-versus-price champions, led by BFG's superb 6800 GT overclocked video card. Logitech's MX1000 laser cordless mouse is blazing fast, while their Z-2300 2.1 speaker set offers exceptional THX-certified sound. Finally, Sega's official Saturn USB Control Pad (import only) is unbeatable for all your 2D classics.

Nominees

- BFG GeForce 6800 GT OC
- Logitech MX1000 cordless mouse
- Logitech Z-2300 THX-certified speakers
- Sega Saturn USB controller

PC Game of the Year

Half-Life 2

Developer: Valve // Publisher: VU Games

Every title in this category offers an experience that helped to define 2004 as an incredible year in gaming. Seizing the crown as Best PC Game of the Year, however, is Valve's Half-Life 2. This was the single most satisfying experience available on the platform in 2004. It provides extremely polished action with a shooter design that is thrilling, mature and intelligent. It is fun and consistently rewarding, much like our runner-up. Yes, World of Warcraft comes very close to usurping the throne, but Blizzard's captivating online RPG still has room to grow in 2005.



Nominees

- Half-Life 2 **VU Games**
- World of Warcraft **VU Games**
- Doom 3 **Activision**
- Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay **VU Games**

Best of Sports

outscoring the competition

Best Football

ESPN NFL Football 2K5

Dev: Visual Concepts // Pub: Sega/Take 2 // Sys: PS2, XB

Runner up
Madden NFL 2005
EA
PS2, XB, GC, PC

Oh, how the mighty have fallen! Sure Madden NFL 2005 was a great game, but ESPN is just as good, and in some respects a lot better than the EA powerhouse. The best part of the game? Hands down the VIP System. This is stat tracking on steroids. With other features like the Crib, first-person football, league play online and some of the best tackle animations ever in a football game, you would be stupid not to pick up this game. And for just $20, it's a no-brainer.





Best Basketball

NBA Live 2005

Dev: EA Canada // Pub: EA Sports // Sys: PS2, XB, GC

Runner up
ESPN NBA 2K5
Sega/ESPN Videogames
PS2, XB, GC, PC

For 2005, it was all about FreeStyle Air. Opening up the playing field, FreeStyle Air allowed players to make mid-air adjustments in real-time. Whether you're pulling down boards or tipping a shot in, the level of control was unmatched in any other game. My favorite feature was the All-Star Weekend mode and the Slam Dunk Competition. Called FreeStyle Dunking, players could string together several different moves to create their own unique dunk. You could literally play this mode for hours! Throw in a revamped dynasty mode and improved visuals and you have the makings for the best basketball game of 2004.





Best Baseball

MLB Slugfest: Loaded

Dev: Midway // Pub: Midway // Sys: PS2, XB

Runner up
MLB 2005
Sony
PlayStation 2

The surprise baseball game for 2004 was Slugfest—that's right, an arcade baseball game had what it took to run with the big boys. Big addition for 2004: online gameplay. Players could go online on both PS2 and Xbox and have at it. Another key feature was the Baseball Mogul. A very refined franchise mode, players were able to run a team for up to 100 seasons—totally unheard of in a baseball game. To mix things up, Midway even added some simulation elements as well, mainly with their pitching and batting meters—definitely a good idea. Coupled with great visuals and Tim Kitzrow on the play-by-play, Slugfest hits it out of the park.





Best Hockey

ESPN NHL 2K5

Dev: Kush Games // Pub: Sega // Sys: PS2, XB

Runner up
NHL 2005
EA
PS2, XB, GC, PC

I have to hand it to Sega (again) for putting out such a stellar hockey game. Just edging out EA Sports' NHL 2005, ESPN had all the trappings and extras to make it 2004's best. Best new feature: the Pass and Go system. Being able to pass to yourself makes one-timers that much more special. Total Stick Control gave players the ability to move their stick in any direction during the game. Poking, tripping—whatever you want to do—it's all possible now. The graphics have also been upgraded in a major way. 2K5 had ultra-realistic faces on players, and some of the game's cutscenes were pretty damn sweet.





Best Golf

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

Dev: EA Redwood // Pub: EA // Sys: PS2, XB, GC, PC

Runner up
Hot Shots Golf Fore!
Sony
PlayStation 2



You can't deny the addictiveness of Tiger Woods, and for its latest, EA made the game much more challenging and rewarding. For 2005, the developers incorporated Tiger Proofing—a system that allows players to modify course dynamics on the fly. A hole is too easy? No worries! Just widen the sand trap and make the fairway a little narrower. Tiger Proofing ensures that top players won't be able to dominate courses like in previous games. Other features included Game Face II, Legend Points and great online play.

Best Soccer

Winning Eleven 7

Dev: KCE Tokyo // Pub: Konami // Sys: PlayStation 2

Runner up
FIFA Soccer 2005
EA
PS2, XB, GC, PC



Just when you thought you had played the best soccer game on the planet with Winning Eleven 6, Konami comes out with the next game in the famed soccer series. Featuring 64 club teams, 21 stadiums and improved player models (if you can believe that), Winning Eleven 7 is, without a doubt, the best soccer game of 2004. Best feature of the game: the visuals. EA's FIFA can only wish to have animations this good. Sure there wasn't any online gameplay, but I'm hoping they'll put it in next year.

Best Wrestling

WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw

Dev: Yuke's // Pub: THQ // Sys: PlayStation 2

Runner up
Rumble Roses
Konami
PlayStation 2

Despite some impressive competition this year, THQ's WWE SmackDown series continues to dominate the genre. The previous installment was extremely impressive as it was, but many subtle adjustments to the gameplay, such as face/heel attributes and match-opening minigames, augmented the already great engine to make SmackDown vs. Raw play even better. As usual, the graphics were spectacular, while authentic superstar voiceovers and online play provided even more playability and depth, and a bevy of optional challenges keep the fun going even after you've conquered season mode. New legends like Bret Hart and Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake were icing on the cake.



Extreme Sports

MTX Mototrax

Dev: Left Field // Pub: Activision // Sys: PS2, Xbox

Runner up
Tony Hawk Underground 2
Activision
PS2, XB, GC, PC

Following their awesome version of Excitebike for the Nintendo 64, Left Field nailed the motocross sim with MTX Mototrax for Activision and then disappeared, leaving in their wake one last racer for us to remember them by. Beyond its detailed graphics, convincing AI, tight control mechanism and stellar course design, MTX is the one and only MX game to nail the bar cam since 989's Supercross Circuit for the PlayStation, and LF remains the only developer to beat Rainbow Studios at their own game. Like all modern MX games, beyond male and female character creation, full career modes, online play etc., LF threw in the token freestyle waste of code, but we won't hold that against them. Cruising around a facsimile of Travis Pastrana's massive MX compound more than made up for it. Sorry about that roof, dude.



Sports Game of the Year

Fight Night 2004

Developer: EA Sports // Publisher: EA Sports // System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

My pick for Sports Game of the Year wasn't a football game or a basketball game—it was a boxing game. But it wasn't just an ordinary boxing game; it was Fight Night 2004 from EA Sports. What made it so great? A little thing called Total Punch Control. Never before has a boxing game given so much control to the player. In a word, it's revolutionary. No more button mashing like in previous boxing games—it's all about the analog sticks. Jabs, hooks, uppercuts and signature moves—even defensive moves—all can be done in real-time with awesome precision. When you throw in cutting-edge physics, fantastic graphics and online play on the PS2, the end result was poetry in motion. Congrats to the EA Sports development team for creating such an incredible sports game.



Overall Winners



GameCube Game of the Year

Metroid Prime 2 Echoes

Developer: Retro Studios // Publisher: Nintendo

There's a strong argument that Metroid Prime 2 Echoes wasn't quite the same level of achievement as our Game of the Year in 2003, Metroid Prime—but continuing with greatness on a system that didn't make much noise this year was more than enough to warrant 2004's best pick on GameCube. Echoes could be viewed as frustrating in its serpentine level design—backtracking was enormous, and you really had to pay fastidious attention to your surroundings—and hardened boss confrontations took some intense concentration for defeat. A triumph of atmosphere and quiet presentation, the gorgeous art and subtle progression of power upgrades and exploratory focus made for yet another memorable Metroid experience.

Nominees

Metroid Prime 2 Echoes Nintendo
Pikmin 2 Nintendo
Zelda: Four Swords Adventures Nintendo
Paper Mario: Thousand-Year Door Nintendo
Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles Nintendo

PlayStation 2 Game of the Year

Jak 3

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony

I almost wish this category didn't exist, as it's almost too hard to call. For Ratchet fans, UYA is perfection, just as Sly 2 is for its faithful and Metal Gear Solid 3 for its. Then there's Ghosthunter, Sony's own game that they left for a smallish third-party rollout on the heels of Primal's less-than-blockbuster performance (due to ignorant reviews and being undermarketed). But when it came down to the Play staff, Jak 3 eked it out over MGS 3 by a hair, while we all agree that a compelling argument can be made for each. Not to take away from ND's win: Jak 3 is simply superb. Imagining what they'll do on PS3 is almost scary. Sony first party is pure power on all fronts...save maybe FPS.



Nominees

Sly 2: Band of Thieves Sony
Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal Sony
Jak 3 Sony
Ghosthunter Namco
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater Konami

Xbox and overall

Game of the Year

Xbox Game of the Year Nominees:
Fable Microsoft
Ninja Gaiden Tecmo
Halo 2 Microsoft
Blinx 2 Microsoft
Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay VU Games

Fable

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft

Halo 2, Jak 3, Ratchet & Clank: UYA, and MGS3: SE were all amazing sequels, but Fable was and is a significant achievement among games. For people who often speak (or bitch) about length and linearity, for the first time, both were addressed. Fable is not only the most non-linear game ever created, but it's as long or short as the heart desires, from 15 hours to well over 50. Anyone who rushed through it, sticking to only the required missions—while they had every right—missed the underlying brilliance of this game, having merely played what amounts to the foundation of a world that allows for 10 times the interaction of anything that came before it, housed within a magical setting that saw more panoramic euphoria than many of us thought possible within the confines of a single free-roaming game world. The essence of Fable is found in its crevices, behind behavioral patterns, hidden bounty, cause and effect and those stubborn Demon Doors, a rich world forged on lock-on melee, spell casting and ranged combat, all deftly incorporated into the mix. This was a grand experiment that actually worked within the confines of an original concept, making it double jeopardy. In fact, thank the stars that it did work, as it's the only glimmer of hope for originality in the gaming cosmos, a universe that is shrinking rapidly, finding solace in the arms of the masses via regurgitated gameplay forged on licenses and sequels. Not that that's a bad thing, but it's all the big buyers see, so every time a game like Fable comes along and exceeds expectations, we all win, and victory has never tasted so sweet.







"The essence of Fable is found in its crevices, behind behavioral patterns, hidden bounty, cause and effect and those stubborn Demon Doors..."

Staff Reflections

individual editor wrap-ups

Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

In retrospect, I'd definitely consider it a transition year as, throughout the industry, most publishers seemed more concerned with finding their place in the grand scheme of things than fostering new ideas as the gaming population continues to expand and change, while retail space has at best stayed the same, not to mention having to deal with most super-store buyers' tunnel vision. I think a major variable in the shape of console games to come depends on how things look after the '04 holiday season dust settles, which, surprisingly, seems to be leaning in the right direction. Original IPs may actually have a glimmer of hope after teetering on the brink of extinction, post Microsoft's buy-out of half of them and systematic housecleaning that followed soon after. They didn't orphan Fable and it sold 600,000 copies right out of the gate. That right there may have saved us. Of course, they followed up by canning the next big thing in BC and the nearly complete (finally) and utterly fantastic Kameo, so it's business as usual over at Microsoft.

Meanwhile, the big, hairy 800-pound gorilla event of year, the release of Halo 2, lived up to its billing as the biggest game launch of all time and then some. The game, on the other hand, while stellar, wasn't the epiphany I expected. The huge focus on the online content definitely stole the single-player game's fire, evident in rampant texture popping, a few drawn-out sequences, some broken AI, under 15 hours of play and a weak "to be continued" ending. I love the game, but I was expecting the second coming. Online gaming is definitely going to play a key role in gaming's future; I just wish that more console game publishers would help usher it in on its own merits rather than giving teams the same time and budget to create essentially two games. What we end up with are the same experiences online that have kept me and the other 90-plus percent of the gaming populace at bay. Part of me also believes that online gaming belongs more in the PC world than the console console, we need more games like PSO, Final Fantasy XI and True Fantasy Live Online. No, wait…Microsoft axed that one too. Perhaps it's time for a company like NCS to step and bring some dedicated apps to the frag-happy table.

Elsewhere, 2D action was barely a blip on the radar in 2004 when it should be enjoying a major resurgence (it's been gone so long, most people would think it was a new genre, which on today's hardware it pretty much would be), along with the near-death of the original IP, the boutique publisher and small studios. And where was Nintendo? They just brought by the most amazing 2D DKC, but you have to play it with friggin bongos! Wha…why…ahhh! Without Metroid on the Cube this year, cue the crickets. And as for the DS, while it is selling well, have you seen the lineup? I'd rather have had some new Virtual Boy games.

Thankfully, next year is already fairing much better; Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath is everything I hoped Halo 2 would be, RE 4 is the third-party GameCube exclusive we've been waiting for (the PS2 game doesn't count: too far off and no way it's as good), Zelda is going to be a religious experience, and everyone's favorite pissing squirrel (Conker) will mark the return of our beloved Rare. It may be the last game of its kind they produce, marking the end of the longest studio reign in the history of platform games, but what a way to go out! With any luck, Kameo will surface on Xbox 2 and we'll get one more lord knows when. Elsewhere, Psychonauts, Advent Rising, Jade Empire and Musashi: Samurai Legend are all due in Q1, and let us not forget Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII, which is looking like the best game in the series since VII.

The most exciting event on the horizon, however, by far, for me, is the PSP, which I consider the most significant piece of hardware since the introduction of the PlayStation. Here's why: for starters, it doesn't feel like a handheld or a toy. The PSP is all screen and Sony style; it plays more like a small

Ninja Gaiden 10

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox

Ninja Gaiden hurt me. It forced me to dig deep and play as I did over a decade ago when I had a week to beat a rock-hard six-level game with limited lives and no save. Only by delivering such a beast polished to perfection was Itagaki able to introduce that same rigid design into an age where only the opposite thrives…and actually succeed. Ninja Gaiden is as close to perfect as action games get. The fact that it's more test than fun, more of a quest to see the next beautiful area and cinema than anything else, is to me its only downfall, although, since that is what Ninja Gaiden is really all about, I suppose it's not really a downfall at all. Wait, I think I need Confucius. I don't even need a sequel on this one. I'm actually good. Rygar, on the other hand…



Sly 2: Band of Thieves 09

Developer: Sucker Punch // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Sucker Punch continued its climb to the top of the fur bearin' heap by pulling a Jak-sized gameplay twist with its beastly ensemble and vibrant universe, led by the coolest gaggle of mutated freaks since TMNT. This time out, they took the Sly pride from platformer to world-design caper, once again exhibiting the polish, attention to detail and control that landed them a spot among the world's most elite developers after starting as a tiny studio with a single original IP so groundbreaking it garnered them a spot in Sony's elite inner sanctum. They chatted up the hints a little too much for my taste in Sly 2, but on the whole, it's an experience not to be missed, from the polished acting to those trademark cinemas and all the thieviusness in between.



The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay 08

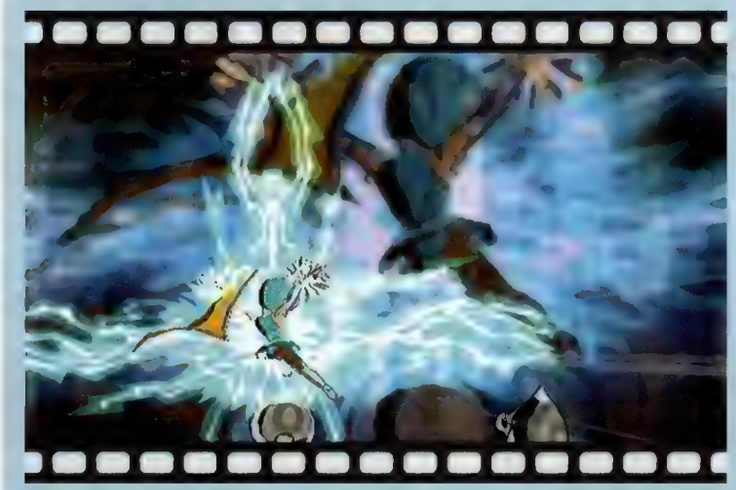
Developer: Starbreeze // Publisher: VU Games // System: Xbox

Strip away The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay's stellar technology and you still have a great game as well as, by some measure, the best movie game ever made. Butcher Bay is the end product of a studio that gets it in Starbreeze, and an actor who gets it who happens to have his own studio in Vin Diesel and Tigon. The culmination of their efforts is a game that is not only visually stunning, well acted and full of fresh ideas, but one that won't leave the back of your mind anytime soon. The few moments you do pop out of its metallic tomb are so memorable they're still fresh in my mind, and the last level twist, which dramatically shifts the game's gears, is among the best interactive endings ever.

Viewtiful Joe 2 07

Developer: Capcom // Publisher: Capcom // System: PS2, GC

One of the few companies doing anything to keep the 2D flame burning (aside from Qwark's aforementioned not-so-mini game), Capcom deserves mad, if not insane, props for rolling the dice on the game industry's lost boys yet again. The abandoned minions of gaming's not-so-distant past, when brands like Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Castlevania, Contra and Gunstar Heroes ruled the day, were granted but a single console fix in 2004, but what a spectacular trip it was. Beyond adding Sylvia to the Joe pride, Atsushi Inaba and company amped the game's patented VFX formula, injected the gameplay with tons more diversity, and had the testes to put out a game featuring a chatty T-Rex. No one does this anymore, people! Rejoice in the one and only viable 2D franchise. Hell, buy two!





Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal 06

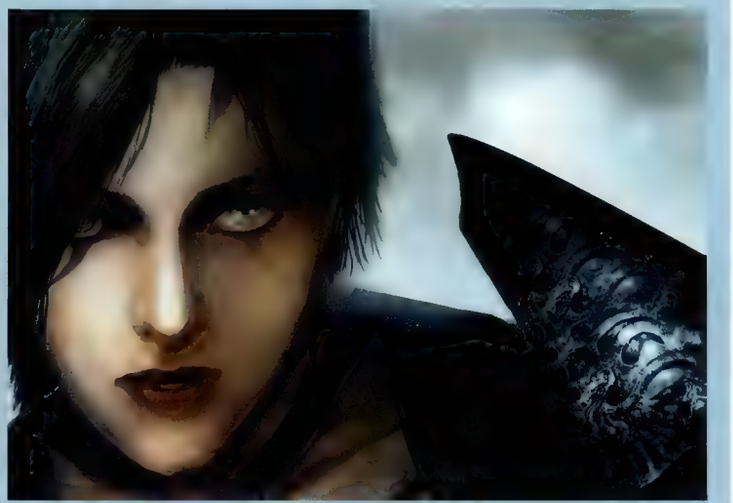
Developer: Insomniac // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Amidst our inner office Jak vs. Ratchet wars, I've always fallen on the side of Jak by a wide margin due to Ratchet's emphasis on shooting over platforming and having to collect bolts to buy *limited* ammo after you've paid through the nose for the actual weapon. And while I still feel the weapons dispersal is in serious need of an overhaul, there is simply no denying the polish and more diverse gameplay in UYA. Imagining what they could have done with it (especially the ending) had they nixed the online baggage is a chip that's formed into a growth on my shoulder, but there's always next time. Not only did they go way more platformy (so not a word) this time out (love the swimming, team play and vehicles), but the 2D Qwark stuff…It doesn't get much better than that. Give me a whole game of that, somebody…please!!

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within 05

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal // Publisher: Ubisoft // System: PS2, Xbox, GC

As much as I love the melee fighting in Warrior Within, the magnificence of the pure platforming elements combined with the hazy ambience and impeccable world design make it my favorite action addiction. It's also nice whenever a studio is willing to pump each version according to spec, as graphical touches afforded the Xbox version add greatly to the game's already wistful environments. Too bad they didn't follow suit with the models. As shocked as I was at the ancillary models' lack of polish and plastic hair, these things are easily forgiven when you're dueling on beams, jettisoning off of walls, fighting monstrosities that hearken back to Ico and taking on bosses big enough to ride. If any game deserves the title of exquisite, it's Warrior Within.



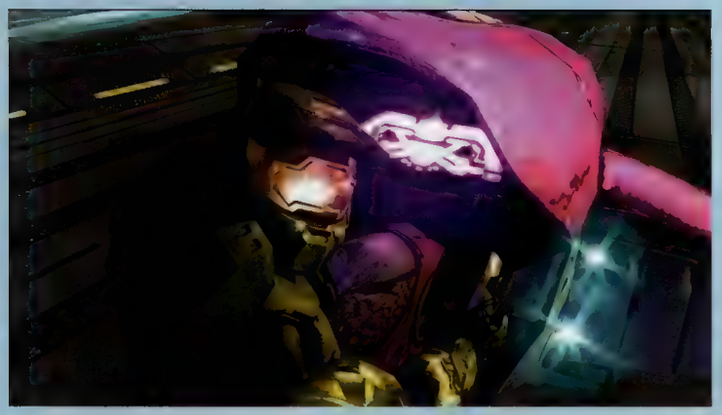
console than a traditional handheld, has amazing 3D capabilities, and it feels like it should cost twice what it does. This is where we'll most likely see the best dedicated multiplayer gaming, crazy new 2D games and the resurgence of original IPs. Not to mention it plays movies—real movies—among many other things. Plus the UMD is simply too cool for words. Once you lay hands on a PSP, it instantly becomes your prize possession. I'm excited about the next wave of consoles too, of course, but that ship won't be sailing for a while.

In 2004, the fact that Fable was able to pierce the mainstream inner sanctum gave me a sense that gaming's future will most assuredly be brighter than its past, which for a while felt to be in jeopardy. New technology fused with the betterment of adventure gaming assures us that things aren't going to spiral into blatant wall-to-wall commercialism any time soon. The challenges spurred by the industry's rapid growth seem to be being addressed, for the most part, shrewdly, as companies like Majesco, Atlus, Sega/Sammy, Konami, Square Enix and Capcom take up the slack for the behemoths set on mass media, making coexistence between the species (hardcore and casual gamers) more plausible than ever. Now if someone would just take the checkbook away from EA…

Halo 2 04

Developer: Bungie // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

There's no denying how well Bungie can spin common gameplay devices into magic with a little help from a theme that sends chills down your spine, real-time cinemas to die for and a load of time. For what it lacks in environmental detail, the breadth and sheer magnificence of Halo 2 is a force to be reckoned with—a space opera that I'm sure will see decades of refinement after shattering sales records that somehow exceeded a hype machine that included a permanent tattoo. If the texture glitches were the trade-off for seamless gameplay, it's a price I was willing to pay, but Jak 3 pulled it off clean on PS2 in half the time, and one must also look past the chunky human character models. Given the buildup, budget and development time, Halo 2 should have been squeaky clean, which it's not, but it's still the reigning king of first-person shooters and one very special experience.



Metroid Prime 2 Echoes 03

Developer: Retro Studios // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube

It looked so much like Prime, I didn't expect Echoes to amount to much more than an extension, which two years later might not be quite as yummy as my first taste of Metroid in 3D. That, along with Retro Studios' tumultuous mystique and my firm belief that Metroid needs to be a third-person game, had Samus flying low on my radar. But once again, Retro has managed to draw me into a first-person world like no other can. Echoes is better than Prime in every way: better detail, better puzzles, better bosses and a better story. It also makes me ponder further what's inside the coolest console design ever. Might the GameCube be the most explosive yet untapped console ever when the dust settles? Between this, RE4 and the new Zelda, it would seem so.



Jak 3 02

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Jak and Daxter was pure innovation, Jak II a platforming facsimile of the house that GTA built, and Jak 3 the marriage of the two, combining the evolving action and scenarios of the original with the guise of the second, while refining every piece of the puzzle along the way. The result: the single most polished, most compelling action game ever created, and hopefully the precursor to many more to come. A better soundtrack, a little less Daxter and a lot more Ashlin and Jak 3 would have given Fable a run for its money. Imagining where ND might take it next, given the technology on the horizon and their tradition of leading the pack in terms of innovation, is the adult equivalent of waiting for Santa to squeeze his fat ass down the chimney.



Fable 01

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

Picking my favorite game was an easy task this year, given I place so much emphasis on ambience and how a game makes me feel. A truly great game engulfs you every step of the way regardless of genre lines, and Fable demonstrated that more than any other game in 2004, if not ever, by actually moving the concept of interactivity forward. The seed that games like Landstalker and Zelda planted years ago, having matured in gameplay and graphics since, has finally sprouted into its next iteration: a place where the participant plays an active role in sculpting the story and to some degree shaping the world. Because of Fable's success, it's an even better time to be a gamer than it already was, having cracked open the door for game and player to connect like never before and for developers and publishers to invest the time and money it takes to create innovative, original content.

Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

"The power to be moved by a game will always come down to the character and setting, the presentation becoming one with the interaction."

In a year like this one, coming up with a top 10 list has never been so arbitrary. Ten other, equally deserving games were waiting to fill the list, and the ones that made the cut could have been rearranged another 10 times with no more satisfying results. But for all the superb choices vying for my appreciation, there wasn't really a game that announced itself as pure and special—nothing that moved me to know I was absolutely playing the year's best. So what to make of a year where there have never been so many good games and yet so few remarkable standouts? I leave 2004 far more satisfied and enthusiastic than 2003, anxiously looking forward to next year's coming transition into the next generation of hardware. In all my faith in the power of the video game to truly enrich our lives, I can't help but look back at this year's crop of titles without an increasing amount of both criticism and hopeful anticipation.

Every game on my list contains a handful of curious flaws and avoidable annoyances, from feeble storytelling and poor pacing to lack of invention and misplaced design. There's no one game that came close to hitting every note, no one triumph that left an indelible mark. I'm growing weary of having to listen to bad voice actors sell even worse dialogue that serves no purpose other than to deflate excellent gameplay; telling a story requires much more than just throwing in some obligatory banter at the wrong time. I'm also getting way too used to watching cutscenes commit the equally disarming crimes of cinematic incompetency, where crude images are left for dead, mutilated even more by random choices of direction; the best games knew their limitations and worked expertly around them. And please don't get me started on the new rule that every game must have one-liners that make most dimwitted summer blockbusters look poignant in comparison. Or the tasteless, obnoxiously calculated, entirely unsexy T&A that is becoming a new misguided weapon in the war for sales. Or the continued disinterest in focusing on rich musical scores, or the hesitance to make original games, or the dumbing down of gameplay by focus groups, or the over complication of game design to be all things to all people, or the mainstream takeover that's diminishing the efforts of the true artists.

In the end, this is a business, and you have to respect and accept the need to approach things a bit differently with game design—you can't expect a sort of indie game developer to thrive when substantial cost and scope of production invariably dictate success. Yet there's no rule that says true visionaries can't be well funded. True talent will always reign.

Every game this year appeared to hold some sort of overt compromise, no matter how engaging the final result. When the bar is only so high, you enjoy what you have and don't often ponder or demand what could be. But come on in context, can you argue that games, as a whole, were so much better four, eight, ten years ago? From where I'm looking at the start of 2005, we're in a good place that simply is wildly more complicated than it's ever been. Technology simply trumps invention right now, but that doesn't mean we haven't reached a sophistication of design greater than anything we've ever played before. A Resident Evil 4 towers over all that came in 2004 because, freeing the imagination behind it, technology has opened a new door for achievement in a series that I've always loved—and presentation is its ultimate success; that ain't new ideas, just a dip into the power of cinematic technique, which is where most successful games seem to be going instead of trying to mine aggressive new gameplay concepts. The power to be moved by a game will always come down to the character and setting, the presentation becoming one with the interaction.

Bottom line: right now, I'm enjoying games more than I ever have, in all their awkward, scintillating, loud and infectious glory. Perhaps the confused industry zeitgeist of 2004 is on the brink of shifting, through the growing negative arising a growing positive. When I think of what might be, what will be in the new order of hardware, other forms of entertainment start to sound obsolete. Until then, call me a little cynical, call me a little harsh, call me demanding, and do call me obsessed about video games. If they're "merely" entertainment, well, it is this entertainment that dominates my life, my friends' lives, and probably yours. I expect a lot from my entertainment; here's to another year where change is on the rise.

NFL Street 10

Developer: EA Tiburon // Publisher: EA // System: PS2, Xbox, GC

I'm still playing NBA Street Vol. 2, and I don't even like basketball. EA took that rocking series' template and wired in football to equally addictive results with NFL Street. The exaggerated, hyper-stylized play didn't get so crazy that the purity of my favorite sport was lost, but the extra juice made the over-the-top skirmishes a nonstop riot. Brilliant call on implementing the game-changing extra point system.

Second Sight 09

Developer: Free Radical // Publisher: Codemasters // System: PS2, Xb, GC

This one came out of nowhere and pretty much left most people totally disinterested. I saw the talented Free Radical's best game to date, an interesting, story-driven action-stealth affair that hummed with imagination and a superb craft. In its simplicity, I loved the look of Second Sight, from the exaggerated animations to the distinct designs to the knowing presentation, and I loved the way it played even more. Missions were inventive and diverse, building off the amnesiac-driven plot, and the stints of platforming and involved exploration—guiding my newfound friend through the world was a blast—were a great touch.



Jak 3 08

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

I liked Jak II well enough, but this hugely improved follow up—the biggest step up of any of the big sequels this year—rekindled the flame that burned bright with the first Jak and Daxter. Challenging and diverse, visually eye-popping and slickly produced, Jak III left most of its competition floundering. The focus on vehicles was a fresh touch, strengthened by staunch physics models. And one of the game's biggest achievements—fantastic animations worked wonders in bringing the delightful creatures to life.

Ninja Gaiden 07

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox

Team Ninja's vocal leader Itagaki validated his pre-release boasting with this long-overdue sequel to the NES classic—a new classic of the modern era to some, frustrating beyond hope to others. The game was undeniably work, reflecting the sweat-inducing insanity of games of old. Stick with it and the reward was off the charts. Boss battles were brutal, the opposing ninja clans wickedly aggressive and requiring meticulous, incredibly focused patterns of attack, and it all went down against a dazzling backdrop that few games this year matched in detail and form.

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within 06

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal // Publisher: Ubisoft // System: PS2, Xbox, GC

Sucker Punch continued its climb to the top of the fur bearin' heap by pulling a Jak-sized gameplay twist with its beastly ensemble and vibrant universe, led by the coolest gaggle of mutated freaks since TMNT. This time out, they took the Sly pride from platformer to world-design caper, once again exhibiting the polish, attention to detail and control that landed them a spot among the world's most elite developers after starting as a tiny studio with a single original IP so groundbreaking it garnered them a spot in Sony's elite inner sanctum. They chatted up the hints a little too much for my taste in Sly 2, but on the whole, it's an experience not to be missed, from the polished acting to those trademark cinemas and all the thieviusness in between.



Halo 2 05

Developer: Bungie // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

The end drags. The story needed a major overhaul. The humans looked poor. The stupid one-liners made me yearn for the silent conflict of Halo. Accomplished style gave way to grandiosity. No matter. Look how freaking awesome the gameplay was, the engrossing level design, the feeling of all-out war with a massive, truly threatening alien race. Scene after scene of intense, large-scale assaults kept my visceral ties to the game so strong that I lost touch with the baggage. Of course, having so much goodness in the Live arena was almost unnecessary next to the best single-player first-person shooter on console, but it was implemented nonetheless and will likely not be bested for a very long time.

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay 04

Developer: Starbreeze // Publisher: VU Games // System: Xbox

Chronicles of Riddick's potent mix of first-person action, stealth and adventure fueled the absorbing gameplay, but the gritty prison setting is what ultimately made this game so absorbing. As the superbly modeled and voiced Vin Diesel made the rounds, stabbing guards and fellow inmates with picks and crawling through the shadows for escape, a keenly placed third-person camera ratcheted up the immersion factor. The incredibly detailed rooms and various sci-fi machinery were impressive enough; add in the depth and texture of striking volumetric lighting and you had one of my favorite settings this year. Another high point: the snarling dialogue between the prisoners and guards actually drove a decent story.

Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal 03

Developer: Insomniac // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Another sequel to one of my favorite games of last year, Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando, this one's arguably the best yet, even if the surprise and retooled gameplay focus of last year's Ratchet were absent. Insomniac took all that was good and just made it that much better. But what made Up Your Arsenal such a great event from start to finish was more than the intense, multiple-weapons-based action, the visually exciting worlds filled with color and life, the fantastic platforming stints and 2D bits. It was the effortless, infectious personality behind it all that ultimately packaged the skilled design; I haven't laughed this much or felt this much love from a game in too long.

Metroid Prime 2 Echoes 02

Developer: Retro Studios // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube

Metroid Prime 2 Echoes could be accused of being too similar to Metroid Prime, but in the year of the sequel, you grab what you like and revel in it. The newness and wow factor of the original Prime are gone, and the game feels scaled down—making room for the throwaway multiplayer?—but stacked next to the competition, the isolation, hypnotic atmosphere and interlocking adventure that marked Samus' trek through this most beautiful alien planet couldn't be matched for the most affecting experience of the year. It was nice being given a challenge, too, from the need to closely examine each room to the engaging task of dissecting gigantic boss battles.

Fable 01

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

You could piece together a lengthy list of things Fable could have done better, complain about its modest length and banal storytelling and underdeveloped combat. But such criticisms mean nothing without looking under the surface, where a rich vein of discovery lays—the magic of its pastoral landscape, the introspective freedom to choose your emotional and physical growth, the care and personality of the inhabitants. I can't recall ever thinking so deeply about my decisions and enjoying the open call of the journey. Sure, everything is presented with the depth and structure of an elementary school novel, but in the guise of an interactive world of this caliber, it all bloomed into something far more poignant when the journey of existing itself became the narrative.



Chris Hoffman

Senior Editor

Over these past several pages, you've seen our picks for the highlights of gaming in 2004, but to me, it only tells part of the story, which is why I've decided to add a few categories of my own.

Most Kick-Ass Gaming Industry Moment of 2004: That would have to be Nintendo's pre-E3 press conference. Yeah, so it was the official unveiling of the DS, but more importantly, it was the unofficial unveiling of Reggie Fils-Aime, the scariest man in all of gaming. Nintendo may insist on losing market share by not going online in order to maintain their profit margins, but they also have a guy who's into "kicking ass and taking names," which is definitely worth something. This year I want to see an E3 Reggie vs. Kaz steel cage deathmatch showdown. The Nintendo press conference also gave us the first glimpse of the phenomenal new Zelda game, which still makes me smile every time I think about it. Note to Nintendo: if you delay this for use on your next console, I'll take your name.

Pure Potential Award: Speaking of Nintendo, the DS has turned out to be much more exciting and successful than anybody imagined it would be when the Big N announced they were concocting a dual-screen system many months ago. Despite a couple great games though, I'm still not sold on the entire idea. WarioWare: Touched! is pure addiction, and I can't wait for the brand-new Super Mario Bros., but I haven't seen much beyond that to convince me that this is the next big thing. I want Nintendo and company to make me eat these words come next year.

Dead Sexy Award: And opposite the DS we have Sony's PSP. My hands-on time at E3 was absolute gaming bliss, and even though I've only had minimal time with the retail Japanese version, my initial impression is that it truly is going to create a handheld revolution. As a handhelds aficionado, I couldn't be more stoked about the PSP's U.S. release. Hopefully the competition between the PSP and the DS will result in 2005 being the best year ever for portable gaming.

Best Packaging: As the gaming industry becomes more corporate, it's nice to see that the smaller companies are still doing things that put the EAs of the world to shame. Witness Working Designs' Growlanser Generations Deluxe Pack. Soundtrack, watch, jewelry... cool touches like this are something I do not want to see go away. Hopefully the sales prove that such products have a place in today's gaming marketplace.

(Not Exactly) Company of the Year: So long, Acclaim. Not to be disrespectful, but we saw this one coming from miles away. The ironic corollary is, naturally, Best Game that Didn't Come Out: The Red Star.

Weirdest Theme Song: Katamari Damacy, of course. I cannot get the theme song out of my head. It lives there with Billy Hatcher. Runner-up: Neo Contra.

Best Game Featuring Mr. T: Rocky Legends. It should have been Clubber Lang Legends. 'Nuf said.

"...the DS has turned out to be much more exciting and successful than anybody imagined it would be when the Big N announced they were concocting a dual-screen system many months ago."

Metroid Prime 2 Echoes 10

Developer: Retro Studios // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube

I'm not particularly a fan of first-person games, but I was nonetheless completely absorbed by Metroid Prime 2 and its vast, atmospheric world.



Shadow Hearts: Covenant 09

Developer: Aruze/Nautilus // Publisher: Midway // System: PlayStation 2

Simultaneously creepy and comedic, Shadow Hearts: Covenant was a great RPG with a unique battle system and some of the most memorable characters ever.



Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal 08

Developer: Insomniac // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

This installment of one of modern gaming's best franchises was polished to near-perfection, with more great weapons and extra platforming. Now how about a full game of that 2D Qwark stuff on PSP?

Metroid: Zero Mission 07

Developer: Nintendo // Publisher: Nintendo // System: Game Boy Advance

2004 was a great year to be a Metroid fan, and it started with Zero Mission, a game that took the original NES Metroid and made it even better.

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door 06

Developer: Intelligent Systems // Publisher: Nintendo // System: GameCube

My pick for RPG of the year, it was the genius writing that put Paper Mario over the top. That and the Bowser stages.



Fable 05

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

I admit I was a bit distracted by some technical aspects of Fable that I thought could have been improved, but when you're immersed in what feels like a real world, truly controlling your destiny as you see fit, everything else is secondary.

Astro Boy: Omega Factor 04

Developer: Treasure/Hitmaker // Publisher: Sega // System: GBA

Treasure's brilliant mastery of 2D gameplay mechanics yielded a game that's loaded with more fun and technique than almost anything on console. Being forced to play through a game twice has never been so enjoyable.

Sonic Heroes 03

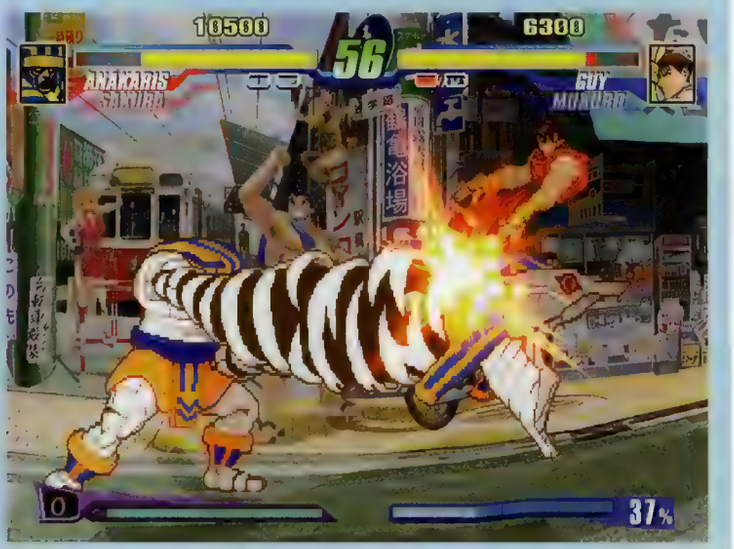
Developer: Sonic Team // Publisher: Sega // System: GameCube

I liked Sonic's previous 3D adventures, but Sonic Heroes is far, far better. The level designs are incredible and the team gameplay is an epiphany.

Capcom Fighting Evolution 02

Developer: Capcom // Publisher: Capcom // System: PlayStation 2

I know I'm a bit alone in my unbridled love of Capcom Fighting Evolution, but I just couldn't stop playing this super-precise 2D fighter. I loved the meshing of fighting styles, the ending artwork and the refinement of the Darkstalkers characters.



Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater 01

Developer: KCE Japan // Publisher: Konami // System: PlayStation 2

To think I once had doubts that this game would live up to my expectations. MGS3 delivered the total package—story, graphics, sound, gameplay, control. As soon as I finished it, I wanted to play again.



Ashley Esqueda

Associate Editor

"...there are some spectacular licensed games out there like Spider-Man 2, but there are too many horrible sequels. We need original content! This is where Fable and Katamari come in..."

Well, this year in gaming was kind of rocky for me. I spent half the year playing Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided, one quarter ogling games I couldn't afford because I was a student, and the last quarter playing everything I got my long, spidery fingers on. So many games happened this year that blew me away. PC games got a whole lot more fun this year with the release of some stellar sequels (Doom 3, Half-Life 2 and Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines). And consoles, sweet night! GameCube tossed Paper Mario and Metroid Prime 2 our way, Xbox made eleventy-trillion dollars with Halo 2 and broke the RPG mold with Fable, and the PS2 gave us games like Jak 3 and Katamari Damacy.

Seriously, there were so many games this year, I wouldn't be able to play them all even if I could play around the clock.

I think something that's important for me to get off my chest this year is that I really think Fable and Katamari Damacy are truly special. As gamers, we've kind of been wallowing in this mediocrity and apathy mode for a couple years. ...we're all too happy with the "brand name" games. I will certainly agree that there are some spectacular licensed games out there like Spider-Man 2, but there are too many horrible sequels. We need original content! This is where Fable and Katamari come in...

These were games that came out of nowhere and broke boundaries. They raised the bar so high that I'm afraid for other upcoming games. And they were completely original. No $100 million dollar film to back its production. Just an idea and some really talented people. Yes, lots of money, no doubt. But original. Katamari Damacy is something simple and fun and *happy*. I can't remember the last time I truly smiled playing a video game until I picked up Fable and Katamari this year. Rolling a sticky ball around and picking up Godzilla isn't something I've ever wished for in a game, but I found myself laughing and smiling so much my face hurt.

This year, I'm asking Sandy Claws to bring more original games in 2005.

Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines 10

Developer: Troika Games // Publisher: Activision // System: PC

Jak 3 09

Developer: Naughty Dog // Publisher: Sony // System: PlayStation 2

Halo 2 08

Developer: Bungie // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

Half-Life 2 07

Developer: Valve // Publisher: VU Games // System: PC

Ninja Gaiden 06

Developer: Team Ninja // Publisher: Tecmo // System: Xbox

EverQuest II 05

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment // Publisher: SOE // System: PC

EverQuest II came through for me this year. I wasn't expecting much out of any MMORPGs this year, but EverQuest took my breath away. The magnificence of Queynos and Freeport struck me in a way that was oddly nostalgic, almost like I was home and had just realized it. SOE brought a champion to the ring in EQ2, and it shows in every instance of detail.

Doom 3 04

Developer: id Software // Publisher: Activision // System: PC

No game scared me more than Doom 3 this year. Although it was a rehash of the Doom of old, it still managed to make me jump more than once and yelp in terror while I played in the dead of night. It baffles me how id pulled off a remake of the original and still made it brand new.

Katamari Damacy 03

Developer: Namco // Publisher: Namco // System: PlayStation 2

I played Katamari Damacy once and I was hooked. No game filled me with more happiness than this one. I never knew a game with blocky graphics and a kooky concept could hook me like Katamari did. When I finally got to make the moon, I ended up with a 650m Katamari, rolling up all the trash, the people, their houses, the buildings, the land, and the sky. This game is the epitome of creativity and simplicity. It didn't need bump-mapping or realistic people. It was what it was, and it was the best in its own special way.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II 02

Developer: Obsidian Games // Publisher: LucasArts // System: Xbox

True story: I'm taking a final in school a few weeks ago when I start laughing hysterically. Everyone's staring at me like I've lost what marbles I have left, and my professor looks at me and asks what's the matter with me. This is what I barely got out between snorts of laughter: "I'm sorry, I'm sitting here looking at this test and all I can think about is upgrading my lightsaber." If that doesn't tell you how addicted I got to KOTOR II, nothing will.

Fable 01

Developer: Big Blue Box // Publisher: Microsoft // System: Xbox

Fable knocked my knickers off this year. Every decision I made playing Fable determined my story. It reminded me of those Choose Your Own Adventure books when I was a kid.

"Steal from the peasant? Turn to page 96."

"Give the poor man some gold? Turn to page 57."

"Go berserk and destroy an entire village? Welcome to Fable."

Fable was the game that this industry needed. In a world littered with Grand Theft Autos and first-person shooters, Fable broke through the humdrum and smacked me in the face. This game single-handedly raised my expectations of every RPG to come in the future, on *any* console. I'm still impressed by the mastery and delicacy the game holds...the music was moving, the visuals were jaw-dropping, and the gameplay was stellar. I'm almost afraid of any sequels. Could RPGs get better than this? If so, gamers are certainly in for a treat.

Anatomy of a cinema

Interview

Mohammad Davoudian, president and CEO of Brain Zoo Studios



Cinemas: Whether in-game or CG, they are the ties that bind action and story, the interactive with the passive, and good ones can be the difference in making or breaking an experience. To find out more about what goes into this often outsourced commodity, we dialed up one of the industry's best, Brain Zoo Studios, whose client roster reads like the who's who of modern media moguls, from LucasArts and EA to Warner Bros. TV and Fox Kids. Coming off of Prince of Persia: Warrior Within, their next stop is Darkwatch, which is said to have cinemas that'll wake the dead…and then give them erections.

play: What defines great CG compared to bargain CG? What are the telltale signs of shoddy cinemas? Is it simply a matter of polygons?
Mohammad Davoudian: What defines a good CG is when you don't notice the imperfection of what you are watching. You're not distracted by bad modeling, bad animation, poor camerawork…things that distract you and pull you out of the cinema. That defines it. If you're involved in the story and don't notice what's happening to the characters, that's good cinematics. It's very similar to film that way, if you notice the effect or notice that it's CG, then we haven't done a good job.

What are some of your finest works?
Our finest works in gaming are Darkwatch, Star Wars Demolition, Ready 2 Rumble Boxing Round 2, Lemony Snicket, Shark Tale, Shrek 2, Medal of Honor, Psi Ops and Freaky Flyers.
Some quality stuff, no doubt. What about films?
Our finest works there are: *Armageddon* and *Mighty Joe Young*.

Ah yes, the mighty ape that got to ogle Charlize Theron… What sort of equipment do you work on? Does it even matter how elaborate the system, or is it more about knowing the software?
Really, the talent of the artist makes the difference, not the equipment. Anyone can get the equipment, PCs and Macintosh. It's not the software, because that's just the tool. It's really the artist and what broad spectrum of talent they bring to the table, as well as a very focused vision for the project.

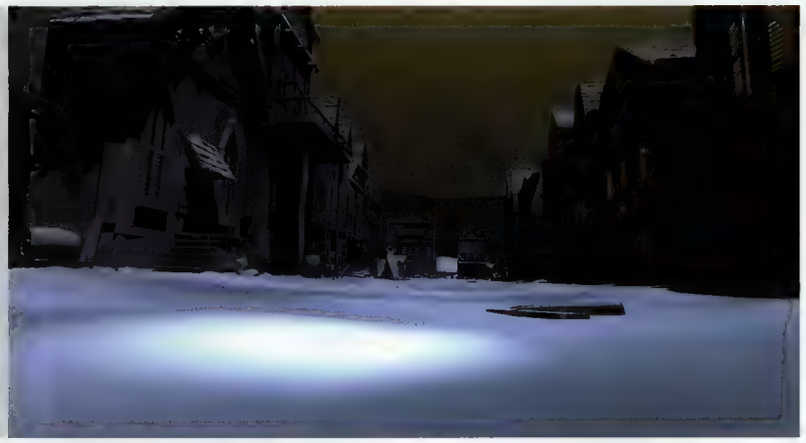
Given that fact, do you ever find yourself at odds with game producers and art directors? What's the process like when you're filling in the blanks for someone's baby?
They are looking for a very visually stunning piece that does not detract the audience from the story or character: We work hand in hand with the producers and directors and make sure that they are happy. If they are happy, we are happy. We don't find ourselves at odds with the client because we work together. Ultimately our clients come to us because they know we can create for them what they want. The only odds, per se, is when we are talking about photorealism. Everyone wants the highest quality, but how high it gets will depend on their budget. Think the triangle of "time money quality." The more time you spend on a project, it builds the quality, and thus the price.

> "Fun gameplay is more important than the visuals—those come second."
>
> Mohammad Davoudian
> president and CEO of Brain Zoo Studios

Is there much of a range in price for, say, a 30-second spot? What's a quality 30-second clip run these days, on the high and low end?
There is a huge range for a 30-second spot. It totally depends on complexity. A 30-second spot on a bouncing ball does not compare to a 30-second spot of two legions battling under a volcano that's erupting. There's no set number for a 30-second spot; it will depend on complexity. The budget is determined by the vision of the client.

Do you believe that CG should closely mirror the in-game visuals? Or is that left







From wire frame to final polish.

to achieve great graphics given the next echelon of technology?
Not too many artists today know how to build high-res models; there's a whole different art to building high-res models. There's an art to putting detail where you need it, not just a general push of a button. And again, if you have really talented artists, when the next gen comes around, you'll be able to put in more detail, more camerawork, more lighting, everything will become much more natural. It will depend on the talent that you have.

Where the artists will lack, because they are so limited right now, is in photorealism. The artwork is not very realistic. It doesn't matter what game it is. The majority of games right now, because of technology, tend to not look realistic. When the next-generation platforms arrive, then those artists being trained to do the photorealism will be your best assets. So the artist needs to understand photorealism and being able to execute that on a next-generation platform.

Darkwatch is a uniquely special property dealing with vampirism, the neo-Old West and, of course, sensuality. How difficult was it to nail the look in CG?
Because we had really talented artists, it wasn't tough at all. Getting the characters dialed in took about a week and a half. Also, it starts at the top, and because Farzad Varahramyan and Emmanual Valdez (from Sammy Studios) had such a strong vision, it was not a problem.

We understand Tala stars in the first ever bona fide sex scene in a video game. Can you elaborate?
It's a love scene. I think this is going to be more common in games, that you will be able to show that emotion or that side of the characters. Eventually you'll see more erotic or more explicit games in the future. It's more sexy than anything else, but it's not explicit.

What do you feel is the biggest challenge creating great cinemas? Is it facial expression, anatomy, movement, making clothes move correctly…? What's the big caveat?
The caveat is for the audience to feel for the character. And that it's not a passing experience for them—that they actually get involved in the character's story. It's facial expression, movement, lighting—think of all the basics that cinema is, but you're trying to do it in a game.

What do you consider the pinnacle of CG work in games?
Fun gameplay is more important than the visuals—those come second. Right now, I'd say it's Halo 2 and Doom 3, but once Darkwatch comes out, then that's going to raise the bar for what gamers will expect in so many ways. Darkwatch is visually stunning, and it's so much fun to play. The philosophy in the design world is "form follows function," and parallel to that in the game world: "art follows code." (But art inspires code.) The publishers should realize when they are doing cinematics they are really creating marketing for the game. If the publishers combined their cinematics budgets with some crossover from marketing, they'd not only save money, but would raise the bar for quality. Commercials pique the interest of consumers, and that's part of marketing.

Have you dabbled in full-length features? I find films like *Kaena* and *Galerians* especially beautiful and fascinating because you know they didn't have Pixar money or staff…but they are few and far between. There's a love of the craft that really shines through those films. Have you considered creating a CG feature for a game property? The majority of live-action game movies flat-out suck. Is it a money issue or does Hollywood have its head up its butt? Take BloodRayne for instance. Uwe Boll will likely spend $25 million destroying the franchise on celluloid. Is that enough to make a quality 90-minute CG feature?
With the technology we have at our studio and the talent we have, we can do a feature. And it is something we will be doing soon. For a game property it is viable; you have a lot of great stories in gaming—great *original* stories—and a lot of great characters, and something good can come out of it.

Because filmmakers are used to doing things a certain way, and taking a certain approach or perspective on a film, they often overlook the simple fact that gaming is not film. You must approach the project differently than you would a film—even though it is a film, its roots are in gaming, and that's an entirely different industry. Take a look at most of the numbers out there—gaming makes more money than the film industry in a year. Most films that were made from games did not take into account the research needed to really tap into the gaming base, so most of them failed. Look at Halo 2—it made more money in one day than many features do. I think there's a lot of features in gaming. The stories and characters are so rich they can be very successful movies. But I also think that the industry will have to really take a look at who they are catering to and what story they tell. Effects can't carry every movie; there has to be some catch across all demographics for it to be a success.
play

to the game's creative staff?
There's so many things that you can't do with in-game cinematics…if you're really looking for extremely high-resolution imagery and exceptional performance from the characters, you have to do it pre-rendered. If you're trying to go above episodics, and into film-quality performances, you must pre-render. Eventually you will be able to do it in the game engine, but we're not quite there yet. It also depends on what the client wants; if they want the cinematics to look like the gameplay, then that's what we'll do.

Once real-time graphics do reach the point CG is at currently, will you ratchet things up accordingly? Do you see publishers sticking to outsourcing to save time and money? What's the thinking there?
I think publishers will still outsource because the developer's primary focus is the game, not cinematics. It's not their focus, it's not what their expertise is at. Companies like ours whose focus is storytelling, character and bringing characters to life can do that for the developer and they don't have to worry about it. Cinematics are secondary to gameplay, but a key element to the success and look and feel of the overall product.

One thing we often ponder is what will happen when poly counts reach the level where realistic human forms are possible. How many 3D artists currently working with limited polys will have the ability to build a natural-looking anatomy? Won't it become more difficult



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Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: Stranger's Wrath
Thought of the Month: Stranger's Wrath was pure magic. Love my PSP!



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Stranger's Wrath
Thought of the Month: The PSP really is that good. Original games, please.



Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

Chris has been playing games since the days of the 2600, back when graphics were blocks and plotlines were barely afterthoughts. Maybe that's why he considers gameplay first when reviewing most genres, and why he pays special attention to all things handheld. He also feels that a great story can be equally compelling, thus his love of RPGs.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Vampire Chronicle PSP
Thought of the Month: The treacherous Decepticons have conquered the Autobots' home planet of Cybertron.



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: PSO: Blue Burst
Thought of the Month: A reminder: more hit points means less dying.



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

Ashley reviews games mostly based on how they make her feel; if they can elicit an emotional response out of her (happy, sad, angry or otherwise), then she knows it's worth her time. She's been playing games since 1986, and will always pledge her allegiance to the glory days of 2D...long live the Castlevanias and Ghosts n' Goblins of the world.

Favorite genres: RPGs, adventure, platformers, beat-based games.
Now playing: EverQuest 2
Thought of the Month: I *still* can't beat Ghosts 'n Goblins. Damn red devils.



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Ridge Racers PSP
Thought of the month: I am finding the PSP rather better than I thought.

Reviews

February 2005

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Game of the Month



Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath 056

Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the stars alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. It's always wise to refer to the text.

★★★★★ Legendary
★★★★ Great
★★★★ Good
★★★★ Decent
★★★★ Average
★★★★ Poor
★★★★ Bad
★★★★ Disaster

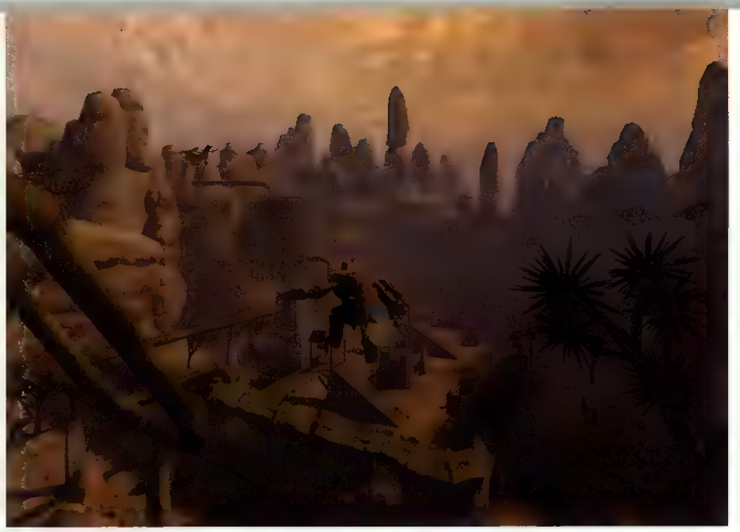


ODDWORLD

STRANGER'S WRATH

Say howdy to Oddworld's Stranger and be changed forever

"This is the game that the industry should hold up as an example of what gaming can aspire to..."

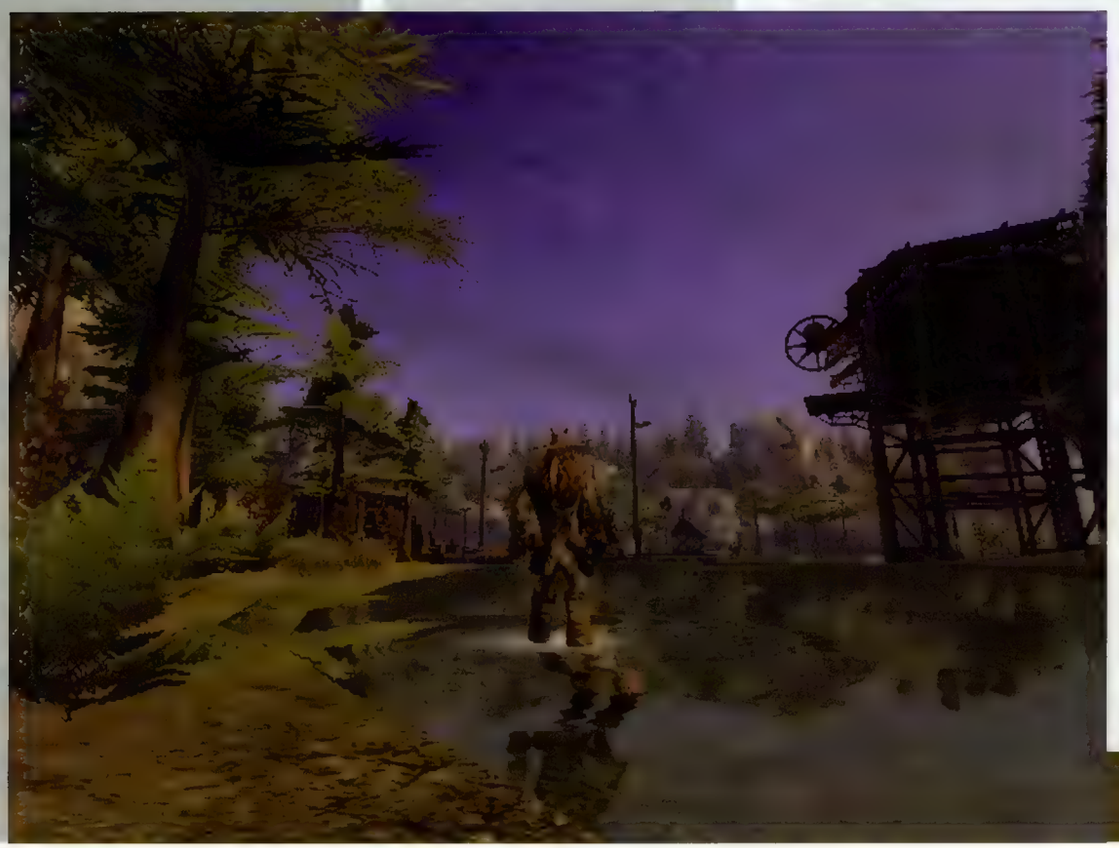


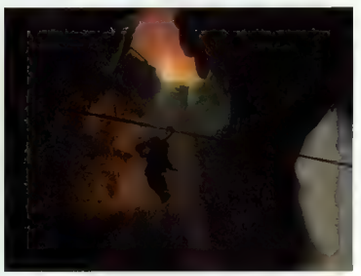
Few things puzzled me more last year than Microsoft abandoning the latest and greatest from Oddworld. An argument can be made for the rest of their orphaned titles, but Stranger had smash-hit-out-of-the-park-complete-with-franchise-implications-out-the-whazoo written all over it. Having had the sheer giddy pleasure of making its acquaintance, however, I think I've finally figured it out. Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath is simply too good. Releasing this game around the same time as Halo 2 would be like Pixar dropping *Toy Story* and *The Incredibles* at the same time. While the world remains fixated on the latest gaggle of pumped up sequels (as well they should), few, if any, are probably aware that there's a new game in town that makes them all look and feel antiquated. I don't make that statement lightly given what's out there, and am willing to accept that there are those who simply won't believe it or simply don't like games revolving around beasts, but if you've been waiting for 3D action and adventure gaming to really hit its stride—to break free from the norm and truly enter the realm of high art and originality—well then, this is simply the best game you will have ever played.

This is the game that the industry should hold up as an example of what gaming can aspire to when the naysayers get their panties in a wad—that magical plateau that began to erode a few years back when the face of the industry began to change. Remember that feeling you'd get when a game was so great it gave you butterflies in your stomach? Well, it's back. I don't know for how long, but you definitely need to grab it while you can. Now that I've sugar-coated it enough to make us all heifers, I guess I'd better elaborate.

You begin the game switching between first- and third-person on the fly, capturing indigenous critters like Chippunks, Stunkz, Boombats, Fuzzles and Thudslugs (each of which has its own very special effect on a given victim) to load into Stranger's crossbow to wrangle outlaws—a series of events that, combined with the game's adventuring elements, equates to some of the freshest, most entertaining gameplay in years. The towns from which the bounties originate to the actual events themselves reek of originality, pure unbridled fun, a level of design and artistry seldom, if ever, seen in any game, and a sense that there is perhaps something very big on the horizon. Even though what you are doing and seeing is almost too good for words, there's this uncanny sense that Oddworld is going to uncork something even more spectacular. When you hit Mongo Valley, you'll think that's it. The single most beautiful area of any game that you've ever seen, you begin to think







Moments of pure mayhem are broken up by times of pure serenity. It's all just pure genius.

that the payoff must be a visual one, and given the bounties that take place within the Mongo Valley, this would have more than sufficed, but…not even close. The only way to put this without spoiling it is to say that just about the time you feel like you're playing the greatest action-adventure game perhaps ever, the game undergoes a grand epiphany—a moment so special that you will be in total disbelief, aware that you are in the presence of sheer greatness. Remember when the castle turned upside down in Symphony of the Night? Like that, only better. I had to drop the controller and call people. From there, it's pretty much just a matter of containing your excitement.

I don't know what else to say about Stranger other than if you have the means, purchase it right now. This is the game that proves once and for all that Oddworld is much more than an elite game developer. This is a group of ignited minds so brimming with creativity and dedication to bringing gamers fresh ideas that it's altogether humbling. It's almost as if they exist outside of the industry as a whole, far removed from any influence or inspiration other than their own. This is what happens when a group of ultra-talented people set out with a single vision in mind and work together as a team to make it a reality—a mantra that was once common in the gaming industry but over the last five years has all but dissipated as outside influences continue to barge in on the creative process. Basking in that again was for me a complete and utter joy; I only hope that over the course of the next few years I'll get to experience it a few more times.
Dave Halverson

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

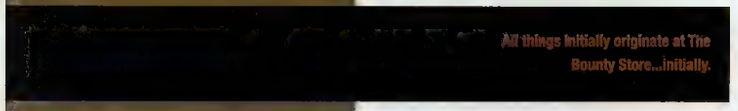
Everything about Stranger is a plus: the art, the characters, the gameplay, the music, the story…all sheer perfection.

Eventually, it ends. Great ending though!

System: Xbox
Developer: Oddworld Inhabitants
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Online: None
Available: January

play Rating ★★★★

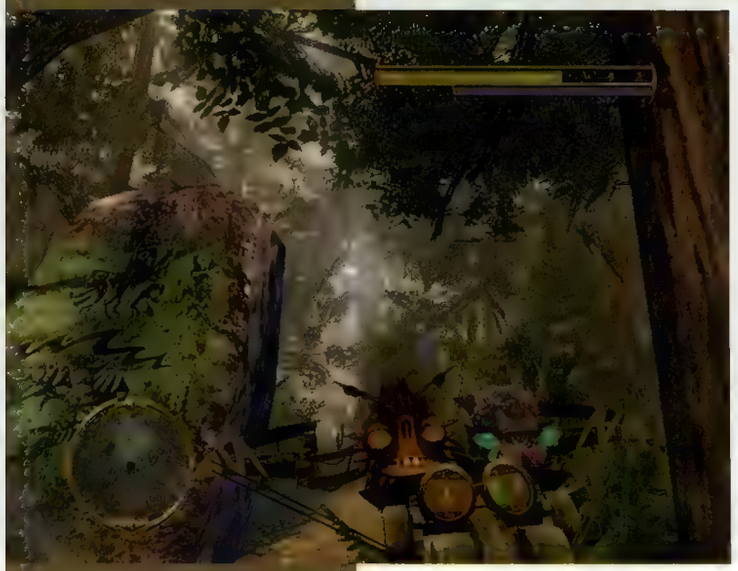




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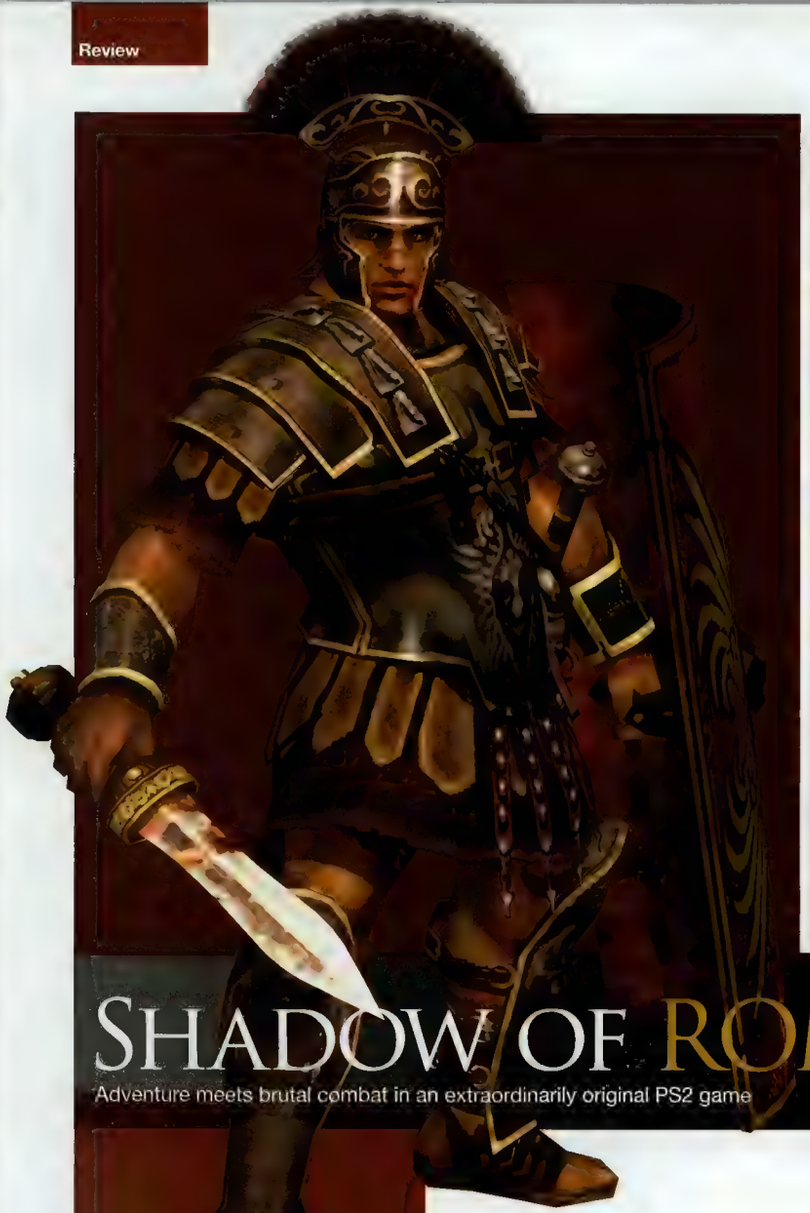
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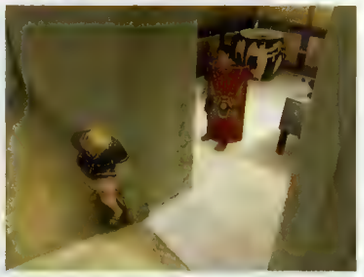
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Whether battling it out in chariot races, slicing down opponents in mass brawls or sneaking around for clues, there's never a dull moment.

"...a game that reaches into your primal thirst for violence with no restraint."



It didn't matter that the nameless, faceless soul cowering in front of me was unarmed and helpless, his head drooped in a plea for his life. Back went my giant blade, longer than I am tall, and off came his entire torso in a shower of blood. The crowd went nuts, and I loved it. Such is the brutal carnage in the gladiator arena of Shadow of Rome, a game that reaches into your primal thirst for violence with no restraint. If you've broken every weapon in sight in a mad rush for survival, a severed limb may be all you need. When a staff just won't cut it, inciting the audience may be the ticket for a skull-crushing mace; a solid landing nicely aids your deep combo-scoring system with a "Juicy Tomatoe." A wide assortment of weapons works differently depending on your situation, but they all ultimately end up providing the same results: graphic death wrapped in cartoon spectacle, exaggerated nicely to fit the theme of the time.

The Japanese have a way of dealing with violence in games that is empowering, emotional and rawly appealing. There is an artful approach to the fighting here that feels powerful where most video game violence feels juvenile and empty. In all its fantasy excess, there's even a slight attempt to provide a conscience to the game, although it certainly could have gone a lot farther for greater emotional impact.

The brute of a man bringing the pain is Agrippa, a Roman soldier who, after witnessing the execution of his mother, enters the gladiatorial games to hopefully come face-to-face with the man who it would seem is behind the murder of Julius Caesar. Agrippa's father is the accused, and the winner of these games will be final executioner for his apparent crime.

Interlocking with the story of Agrippa is his friend Octavius, who provides the immersive stealth-and-puzzle adventure stretches. The game sets up some awfully prosaic scenarios at times, but not once was I less than thoroughly entertained, completely wowed by the magnificent visual choices that resemble the paintings of the era. Searching for clues and revelations into the whirlwind of a political conspiracy yielded a spirit of classic role-playing games, where characters would reveal reams of information through text as much as spoken dialogue. I was actually interested in the story, especially drawn to its original ideas that, while riding on predictable plot twists and clunky writing, at least found an involving core lost to most game stories.

There's a really nice balance struck between the two styles of play, which are keenly presented and impressively constructed. It sometimes feels like the designers got a little lazy structuring their ideas and could have challenged us with more complex scenarios, but the world is so much fun to explore and interact with that you forgive the faults—there are enough nitpicks here and there that can't be denied—and just give into the rousing spirit of it all. And when you want to snap the controller in the gladiator arena when forced to deal with moments of frustrating team AI, be patient: Shadow of Rome is a bold, fantastic entertainment. Brady Fiechter

Shadow of Rome

The mix of gameplay styles flowing around the enjoyable story feels quite unique.

Everything may be well implemented, but you can't deny the loopy scenarios.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Online: None
Available: February

play Rating ★★★★

Xenosaga Episode II

Jenseits von Gut und Böse

Epic in storytelling if not in scope



Xenosaga Episode II just isn't as good as the original. There, I said it. For all its high production values, gorgeous visuals, excellent music, great story, astounding cutscenes and added features, the first Xenosaga simply has this one beat. Or, to put it another way: even though I've played better, Jenseits von Gut und Böse is still a very good, fulfilling, compelling RPG.

Picking up where the original Xenosaga left off, Episode II continues the epic space opera detailing humanity's battle for survival against the mysterious Gnosis and the destructive power known as U-DO. In many ways, Episode II is a more personal story, dealing with the characters' inner demons as well as the galactic menace, opening the way for some great character depth (with some occasionally powerful voice acting) and insight into our heroes' pasts, especially Jr. and MOMO. For each secret revealed, of course, more brain-bending mysteries present themselves, setting the stage nicely for the next installment. The journey also acts as a vehicle for more religious examination, human introspection and some amazing cinematics—including one galaxy-shaking explosion near game's end that must be seen to be believed. Even so, Episode II feels less grand than the original, almost like an epilogue to the first game.

Part of this undoubtedly has to do with Episode II's rather small size. While the high challenge prevents the game from being over *too* quick, there isn't a whole lot of ground to cover—fewer than 10 dungeon-type areas, not counting the bonus areas you can access after you beat the game. Loads of side-quests, sometimes featuring nicely integrated minigames, help compensate, but the game was still over a lot sooner than I expected.

Another area that didn't completely meet my expectations was the battle system. Though challenging, complex and deeply strategic—even early conflicts require mastery of advanced techniques to survive—the battles just lacked the excitement, variety and flash of the original Xenosaga. Somehow, hitting enemy weak zones and chaining attacks just isn't as fun as the multitude of weaponry available in Episode I, and no attack customization is available outside of ether skills. On the plus side, however, the mech battles have been improved dramatically. Now completely separate from the character battles, mech combat (and exploration) has now been given a real sense of significance and, though simplified, offers a nice change of pace from the on-foot battles.

Comparisons to the original game aside, Xenosaga Episode II is an enjoyable RPG that kept me enthralled for the duration. This series has infinite promise, and if Episode II's purpose was to drive the series forward while exciting me about the upcoming sequels, then it's a smash success. Chris Hoffman

Xenosaga Episode II

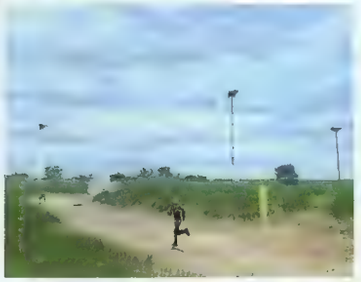
Great storytelling, graphics and music. New ES mechs and side-quests are nice additions.

A bit on the short side. Battles are often too drawn out.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Monolith Software
Publisher: Namco
Online: None
Available: February

play Rating ★★★★







"...Xenosaga Episode II is an enjoyable RPG that kept me enthralled for the duration."

Beautifully choreographed sword fights against Morgulis make for some truly amazing CG.











Criminals are quick to talk when you're smashing their faces in.

The Punisher

How not to make a comic book-inspired game

"...torture by holding a human head under a dangling array of kitchen knives..."

The Punisher, I believe, contains the first death by a cremation incinerator in a video game. And I can't remember the last time I had the opportunity to toss a victim head-first into tusks. Also original: torture by holding a human head under a dangling array of kitchen knives, and death by hydraulic-car lift.

These torturous kills, which reward with health and added bonus points that can be used to buy upgrades you'll never need or notice, may make you laugh a few times, maybe even smile with perverse pleasure, which will then lead to mental shutdown. If The Punisher had more style or character or good sense, there might have actually been some sort of visceral redemption to its violence. I felt no more thrill clamping one of my victims' heads in a vice grip than I would snapping the plastic head off a Ken doll.

The Punisher is a broad miss, an unfortunate example of what happens when gamemakers mistake a newfound freedom for anything goes with actual creative fun. But more than that, The Punisher is a sloppy, poorly designed, unattractive action game. Even the narrative is lacking, especially considering the clout of the talent penning it. Most of the dialogue takes place between Frank and the victims he tortures for information—a really cool concept that falls short—which does little to inform the plot or invite you to care.

To its credit, the game has an excellent variety in its locations, which are quite interesting in theme while alternating between visually decent to fairly flat. The real offender is the shooting gallery gameplay, mired in lifeless enemies that serve as little more than stiff targets, one numbing wave after another. They can be so nonreactive and simplistically automatic that it borders on incredulity, and yet at times they work well enough around the decently laid-out levels to at least jump-start your heart for a workable fire fight; play on the hardest setting or be prepared for boredom.

When the game is at its worst, it feels like it shouldn't have shipped. In one boss battle, the guy started shooting at me, turned, and shot in the opposite direction; when he was worn down, he entered a corner and stopped in his tracks. Often, the base design is just bad: take the tank battle, where you run to a left wall, stop as the tank fires in predictable sequence at your completely covered safe point, you pop out, repeat. Sometimes enemies will employ the same dumb moves, firing at a wall you're behind in a completely opposite room as you listen to them shoot, pause, shoot, pause, waiting for you to take the open shot without thought.

I've always liked Volition's games; Red Faction was a great FPS. There are some good points to The Punisher, good ideas undeveloped. But in the end the game, like the movie it was also inspired by, has failed to properly tap into the vivid, dark energy of the comic book.

Brady Fiechter

The Punisher

Good settings and impressive variety.

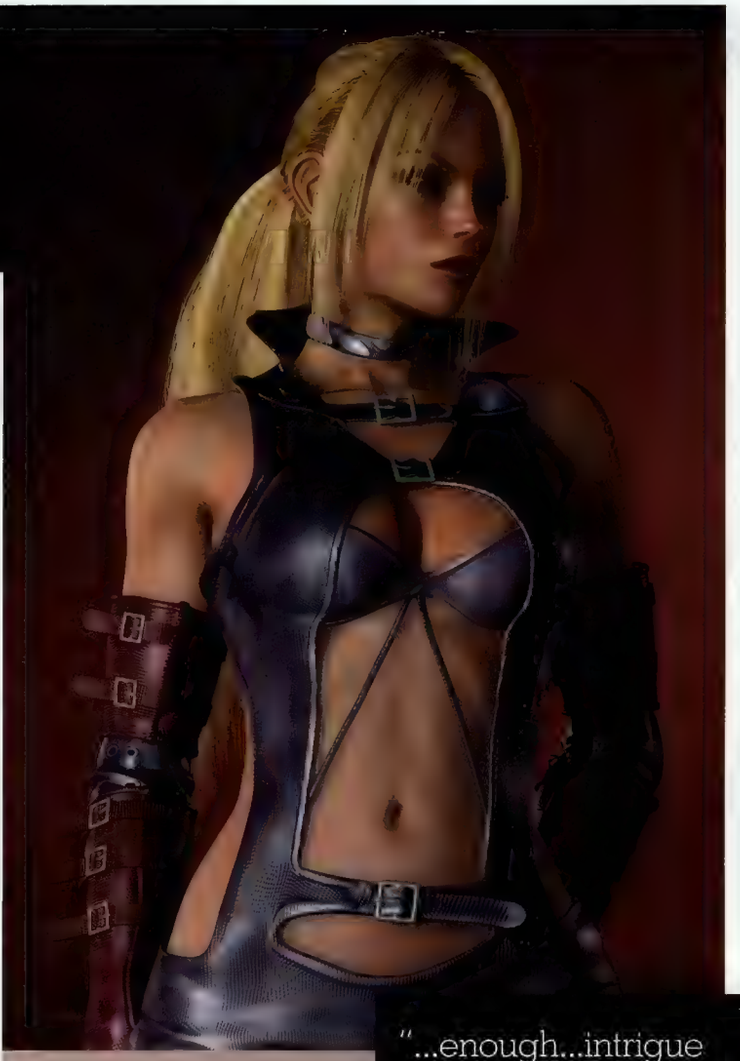
From the presentation to the violence to the gameplay—all off the mark.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Volition
Publisher: THQ
Online: None
Available: January

play Rating ★★★★

Death by Degrees

What a view to a kill



We all wanted Death by Degrees to be a great game. I mean, an epic adventure starring Tekken's sexiest assassin crafted by the artisans at Namco…what's not to root for? But when you combine the fact that the game hasn't shown well with Namco's seemingly sales-stifling preview protocol, the buzz machine never even left the station. Approved screens to this day depict a fraction of the beginning of the game and none even begin to show its inner beauty. I'll never understand why Japan works so hard to keep their best games secret. It's great to be surprised, but what should have been billed as the biggest thing out of Namco since Soul Calibur will instead roll onto store shelves with ambivalence at best. DBD is, in a nutshell, Namco's betterment of the Resident Evil formula (save for RE4, because it too improves on the formula) filled with enough espionage, illegal arms trade, intrigue and terrorist activity to make James Bond run for cover…starring one Nina Williams.

With that distinction, however, comes inherent quirks such as short load times between rooms, pausing to cycle through item management (which is not so much a problem as a memory issue) and the big, hairy fly in the ointment: fixed cameras in areas where you need a 360-degree view—a problem that Namco has seen fit to rectify once and for all. Holding down the R2 button not only places the camera over Nina's shoulder to look around, but allows her to run around in third person most of the game, right up until she engages the enemy and the wonderful 360-degree combat takes over. Similar to but more refined than that of Rise to Honor, Namco has elevated dual-analog fighting controls to Tekken standards, complete with a skill points system that allows you to unlock special moves from a massive arsenal.

Nina can also use her melee and weapons caches on the fly (depending on the size of her weapons belt), perform evasive maneuvers and, when her sub-gauge is full, execute critical strikes: a series of concussive blows (depicted via x-ray) that shatter bone and stun internal organs. We even get to rub up against the Tekken Force, but I'll leave that bit of gaming excitement to you.

Elsewhere, DBD plays out much like a Resident Evil and Metal Gear combo, combing over a series of rich environments looking for keys, clues and arms while solving intelligently designed puzzles in order to forge ahead. Namco has added sniping scenarios and a miniature reconnaissance hover-device called the Stingray into the mix too—touches they incorporate masterfully into the grand design. Speaking of which, let's talk about these graphics for a minute. Although you won't see it right away (this game truly builds in every respect), by the 10-12 hour mark you'll have seen things that rank amongst the best the PS2 has ever rendered—real-time environments that look as good if not better than pre-rendered, as well as some of the best in-game models this side of Ghosthunter. Nina herself is simply stunning. As she takes damage, her clothing shreds and her body forms abrasions, and she is exquisitely animated in every respect, with the exception of animation for stairs, which is a puzzling oversight given how perfect she is otherwise. As for the cinemas that tie it all together, Namco is in a league of its own when it comes to in-game movies, and these are among their best, both in-engine and full CG.







Nina fighting early on... Namco approved only a handful of screens for DBD, none of which do the game justice.

> "...enough...intrigue and terrorist activity to make James Bond run for cover..."

Death by Degrees is yet another Q1 offering that makes 2004 look aged—a year we were convinced saw every console at its best. This wave of machines is certainly going out with a bang, and Nina Williams is holding one of the biggest guns. Dave Halverson

Death by Degrees

- Excellent models, level design, music and scenarios. A rich, deep adventure.
- Loading between rooms and a cumbersome, slow item management screen.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Online: None
Available: February

play Rating ★★★★

MechAssault 2
LONE WOLF

Mech fighting leaves a huge mark on Live







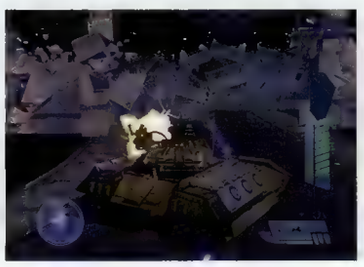
"...the mechs look appropriately powerful and menacing, and the destruction they bring looks great..."

MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf fits snugly in the blow-stuff-up genre. The big twist is the presence of mechs for the blowing stuff up, which are also occasionally quite handy for stomping on soldiers and tanks, which then blow up. The mechs may move with the grace of bulldozers through quicksand, but that's not about to stifle the fun you get from commanding such gargantuan power, crumbling buildings and mountain passes and concrete tunnels with a flurry of rockets and machine-gun spray.

The huge assortment of machinery you come across—you can exit your mech at any time for a new one—all move and feel differently enough to keep things upwardly appealing, whether tethered to the ground with a lumbering giant, commandeering a tank for quicker hit and runs, or jumping into a sleeker model outfitted with jump jets.

Hoisting the dead weight of the dull, monotonous landscape, the mechs look appropriately powerful and menacing, and the destruction they bring looks great—some of the best explosions you'll see in a game. As lumbering as they may be, the mechs open up more epic-feeling confrontations with the same-powered enemy, who imparts a sense of immense mass and force as they collapse, sometimes staggering from well-placed shots, clumsily getting back on their feet. Battles take on a different dimension than we often get in a blow-stuff-up game, where conflicts aren't over in a few quick shots, coming off like mini-boss battles that really get the adrenaline uniquely flowing.

In the stupidly scripted, overly basic single-player missions, you'll probably find interest trailing off by the swift end. Although these campaigns are more fleshed out than the original, similar MechAssault, the real appeal lies in multiplayer battles, which range from familiar all-out wars in deathmatch to intense not-it fracases. There are several modes to lock into, but the most time will ultimately be waged in the superior conquest mode. Here you join a faction and wage war to secure planets, each offering a unique challenge and structure. Because battles are large scale, spread out across multiple regions and ongoing, the ever-shifting conflict becomes unusually epic. Granted, you won't find anything else like MechAssault 2 on Xbox, so a need to fill a niche may pass your test in single-player. But really, if you're not Live, you're missing the real worth. Brady Fiechter



Getting out of your mech to grab the next available mechanical monster is a riot.



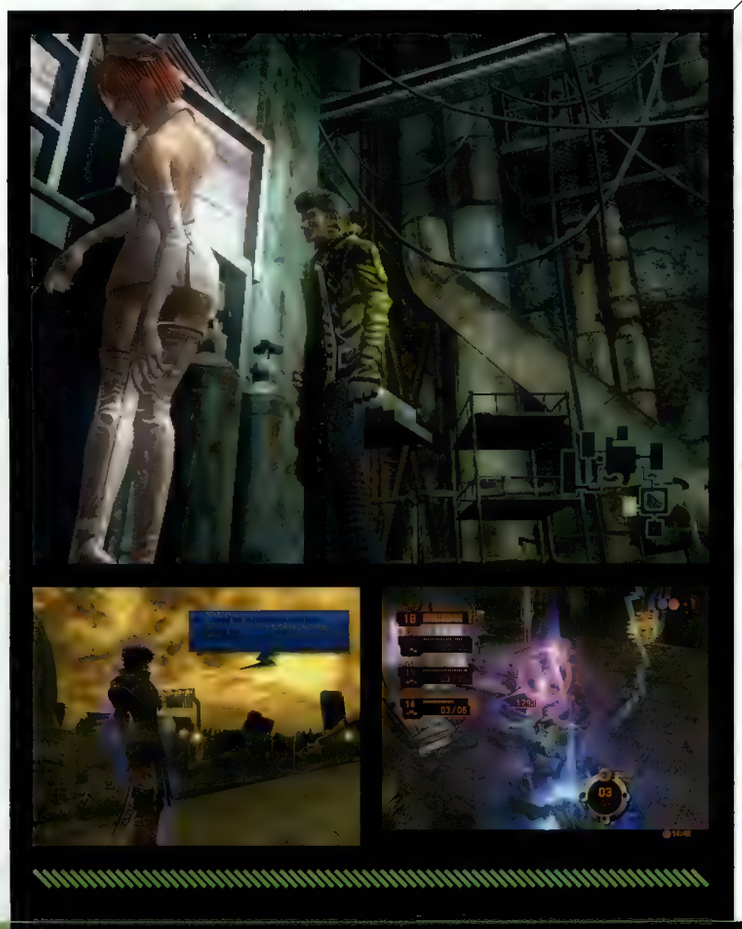
MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf

+ Neurohacking mechs and getting out for a new ride is a nice improvement.

− Single-player could have gotten more attention, and unattractive style doesn't help.

System: Xbox
Developer: Day 1 Studios
Publisher: Microsoft
Online: 12p multiplayer (versus/co-op)
Available: December

play Rating ★★★★



Once above ground, prepare to be dually amazed. As Visions is the most impressive-looking subterranean stronghold ever conceived, the arenas—massive inner and outer structures amidst a ruined Earth—are breathtaking to say the least, as well as host to arena fighting honed to perfection. The classic give-and-take exchange is well at hand—timing defensive moves and counters, utilizing close and ranged attacks—but presented in a fresh way, remastered for a new generation of cyber warriors. Lock onto an enemy (one touch, no holding) and the lock holds regardless of how far apart you become, in any direction, among massive maps; and the combat system is quite brilliant. Colored spheres that render descriptions of their power as you touch them grant defensive, offensive and special moves assigned to whichever button you press to grab them. So depending on the enemy type, you construct your cluster and go to war. And you can change your attack any time new spheres appear, so if a certain tactic isn't working, simply evade, find the skill of choice and reengage. Further nuances come by way of an aura counter (different moves cause different levels of expenditure, while certain counters build it faster) and still more by way of story elements that part the action. The goings on in the single-player story reach into every facet of the game, and should you frequent Live, you can take your show on the road: play in tournaments, create clans, battle in versus modes, sell and ante skills and so on. I'm strictly a single-player-type personality, but if you fancy the Live experience, it's in here.

Perfect controls and breathtaking visuals aside, the localization here is also superb (Majesco grabbed this one post Microsoft polishing every nook and cranny), and the music is, in a word, euphoric. When the first thing you hear is Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, you know you're in good hands. It is time once again to look beneath the commercial gleam and bask in the glory of the latest original property from one of Japan's most talented teams—the heart of gaming beats within. For their next trick, perhaps Majesco can leverage Voodoo Vince and add yet another jewel to their impressive crown.
Dave Halverson

Phantom Dust

+ As an arena fighter with RPG elements, it doesn't get any better. Drop-dead gorgeous.

- As wonderful as it is, I wish it was a full blown action/RPG.

System: Xbox
Developer: Microsoft Game Studios Japan
Publisher: Majesco
Online: Multiplayer, tournament
Available: February 2005

play Rating ★★★★

Phantom Dust

A cyberpunk call to arms

"The classic give-and-take exchange is well at hand... remastered for a new generation of cyber warriors."

When it comes to capitalizing on Microsoft's blunders, Majesco has proved the most savvy of them all. Having already secured Tim Schafer's twisted platforming masterpiece Psychonauts, they've gone and snatched up another Microsoft outcast: Phantom Dust, the cyberpunk epic from the director of Panzer Dragoon Orta, about a future where poison dust has erased humanity's collective memory and driven us underground. The dust, which has given rise to mutant life forms on the surface, affects a chosen few with the ability to manifest their will into attacks. These powerful beings, called Espers, serve in the underground order "Visions," whose purpose is to scavenge the surface for clues as to who we are and when and how we lost our place in the world—dangerous business for two reasons…if the demons don't get you, the dust will. Too much time above ground, and any memories you've gathered since awakening will be dust in the wind.

In the single-player game, you take on the role of Alpha, a powerful Esper found opposite another, Edgar, entombed on the precipice of a monolithic bridge—a beautiful site that spills into a game that belongs in a class of its own. If Phantom Dust boiled down to the usual arena-fighting-with-integrated-story formula that reached its sell-by date a few years back, that would be okay given the art on display, some of the best models and character designs the Xbox has ever seen and environments that react in real-time to the forces at play (hit the ground from a 50-foot-high levitation jump and you make a crater; it's just wicked cool), but it's so much more. Underground in the Zion-like labyrinthine base of operations, things play out with full role-playing regalia. There is much to do, learn and see. Beyond the fairly extensive training (the action is full of nuances) lies the mastery of special skills, interacting with your fellow Espers—many of which you'll work with, save or come to know over the course of the game—and appeasing your many mentors as the story slowly comes into view, depicted in captivating, visually arresting cinemas. This is not simply a mission-in, mission-out fighter, but an action-RPG hinged on an evolving array of fighting missions.



This is how Xbox games are supposed to look. It just took longer than expected to get here.

NanoBreaker

A savage action spectacle

There are plenty of 3D hack 'n' slash action games out there, but few do the genre as much justice as NanoBreaker. The latest from Castlevania mastermind Koji Igarashi just feels incredibly natural—like Zone of the Enders, the controls are pure perfection, hardwiring you directly into cyborg hero Jake Warren and into his futuristic world, making the visceral thrill of slicing and dicing (and impaling and smashing) enemies that much sweeter. Carving into an enemy with Jake's Plasma Blade carries a weight and reaction so polished, the result is poetry in motion rather than simple swordplay.

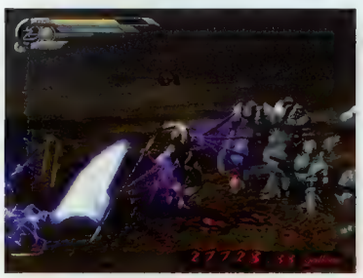
The beauty of NanoBreaker's combat lies in the fact that it's more than mere button-mashing. Four attack types—horizontal slashes, vertical slashes, thrusts and juggles—are each specific in effectiveness to the enemy at hand, and when strung together, utilizing the game's evolving, customizable combo system, transform the Plasma Blade into various implements of death for further strategic depth. Beyond that, Jake can employ expertly timed blocks to reflect shots back at foes, utilize the Plasma Blade as a whip to ensnare enemies, and wield an array of special moves that builds throughout the game, unleashed by collecting orbs from defeated foes. Whatever manner you choose to deal death, the result is a satisfying and gorgeous smorgasbord of violence, as Orgamech (organic host bodies transformed by rogue nanomachines) limbs are severed and fountains of flowing fluid blanket the gritty, amazingly sharp neo-modern environments.

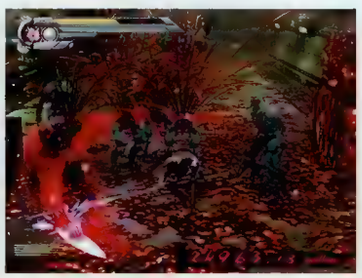
Other aspects of NanoBreaker continue to evolve as the game progresses. Jake earns experience as he dismembers his enemies, augmenting his life bar or special meter, while power-ups further increase his maximum strength. His repertoire increases as well, providing better means to explore the game's interconnected world and overcome the occasional platforming challenges and puzzle-like obstacles, always punctuated by impressive pattern-based bosses that few besides Konami can do so well. In many ways, NanoBreaker is everything I wanted Castlevania: Lament of Innocence to be.

Of course, not everything in NanoBreaker is perfect. The camera frequently gets stuck in inconvenient positions, the music often feels out of place, sounding somber or strangely frontiersman-like when it should be rocking, and the storytelling is nothing special (although the premise itself is rather inspired). Still, as pure action goes, this is among the best game of this type I've played in years. NanoBreaker gives me every confidence that the next Castlevania will be nothing short of amazing.

Chris Hoffman









"Carving into an enemy with Jake's Plasma Blade…is poetry in motion rather than simple swordplay."

NanoBreaker

Perfect controls, great graphics, thoroughly satisfying hack 'n' slash action.

The camera and music could have used more attention.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Online: None
Available: February

play Rating ★★★★





The Getaway

Black Monday

Someone bloody shoot me...

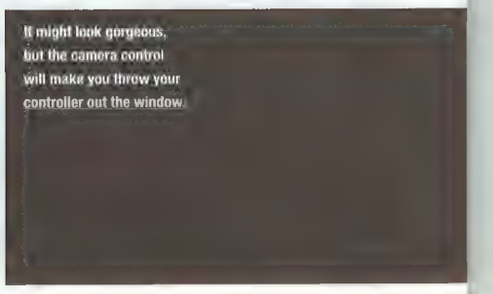












"...it's almost like they picked parts of the first that worked really well, and then broke them."



I heard so many good things about Team Soho's second installment of its gritty cinematic game in a very realistic London, I was pretty stoked to review Black Monday. What I encountered, however, was a slew of problems that reduced my gameplay enjoyment to mere ashes. It has its ups and downs, but for the most part, Black Monday is one big downer, and not in that über-cool *Goodfellas/Godfather II* kind of way.

You begin Black Monday with a flashback and some excellent voiceover... which seems to be the one thing that Team Soho gets right, even if it is absolutely cluttered (almost to the point of overuse) with the f-bomb. Now, I'm a fan of swearing myself, but in some instances, it was just absurd...these guys could make Ray Liotta blush. Aside from that, the story is lackluster and obscenely fast. Veteran gamers can finish Black Monday in around 8-10 (that's right, 8-10) hours. You get absolutely no sense of character development or accomplishment when you're finished; I never even truly grasped the storyline. The Eastern European gang that's supposed to be the central villain is transparent; you never really understand why they're doing what they're doing. On top of that, they just don't seem...evil, cruel, villainous or (insert your favorite synonym for evil here). My Chihuahua is a bigger threat to society than these guys... but that's not saying much.

Last month's preview mentioned that the main character, Mitch, was a rubber-band-man and we hoped it would get fixed. Well, Mitch's movement has been fixed, but Soho apparently decided to overcompensate for this fix by making the camera almost completely uncontrollable and hard to use in tight spots. There were too many times I found myself attempting to shoot someone and getting killed while trying to aim at them. That's not to say that Black Monday is tough, though. Team Soho certainly made up for the difficulty of the first Getaway by making this one fairly easy—hence the quick finish time.

I don't know what Team Soho was thinking when they made this downhill sequel...it's almost like they picked parts of the first that worked really well, and then broke them. Things that needed fixing weren't fixed. Things that worked were "fixed" to the point of them not working or being incredibly frustrating. Sure, you get used to the camera angles and the weird controls, and the storyline is made bearable by excellent voiceover, but in the end, Black Monday is nothing but a lackluster sequel that fails to top its predecessor. Ashley Esqueda

The Getaway: Black Monday

- Great voiceover and slick music infuse the spirit of London.
- Controls/camera almost unbearable; flimsy story; fast finish time.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Team Soho
Publisher: Sony
Online: None
Available: January

play Rating ★★★★



Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II
The Sith Lords

If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny





"Watching your entire party fall into darkness with you…it's a feeling like no other."

Good video games are like good movies: sequels often fall short of their predecessors except in a few rare cases. Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords is one of those cases. Granted, I'm a huge *Star Wars* fan in the first place, so I'm slightly biased…but, I'm also a video game critic, and that's why I didn't give KOTOR II 4 stars. It's excellent, but it ain't perfect.

First things first: KOTOR II starts off slow, just like its daddy. Your main character most likely won't be showing off a lightsaber until about 10-15 hours of gameplay. The graphics are unchanged from the first, save for a little metallic texturing on armor and varied surfaces, which makes it look dated. The model animations are also very…mechanical. My lady Jedi looked like the Terminatrix at times while running, which wasn't exactly the updated animation I was looking for. The battle animation is decent, but again dated. I still giggled like a schoolgirl when I built my first lightsaber and charged into battle, though.

Look at me, here I am talking about all the slights of KOTOR II, and you're wondering why I gave it a 3.5. Well, it's easy: KOTOR II is the best RPG this year. The story is so flawless and complete that you never feel a character's presence (whether they are in your party or an NPC) is contrived to force the story forward. Everyone's life interweaves in such a masterful way, and the game's voicework is amazing. Krela and Visas are two to point out as especially good.

Character influence was one thing that really brought this game into the big leagues. Watching your entire party fall into darkness with you…it's a feeling like no other. Their faces get grey, they look old, they get dark markings and darker tones in their clothes…it makes the game immersive in a way the first never did.

The story laid down in KOTOR II blends in so wonderfully with the first KOTOR, it feels seamless. The ultimate reason for your character's existence and background makes so much sense, you could play both games back to back and never ask a question. The story throws in a couple curveballs here and there, but I won't spoil it for you.

I absolutely loved The Sith Lords, flaws and all. HK-47 defines love as "making a shot to the knees of a target 120 kilometers away using an Aratech sniper rifle with a tri-light scope." That says it all.
Ashley Esqueda

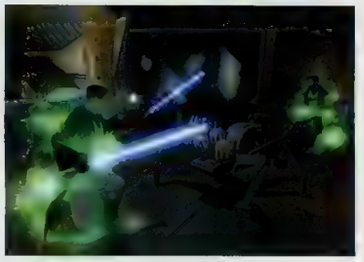
Star Wars: KOTOR II: The Sith Lords

- Compelling storyline and excellent voice acting keep the game fast paced.
- Dated graphics don't exactly ring my bell, if you know what I mean.

System: Xbox
Developer: Obsidian
Publisher: LucasArts
Online: None
Available: December

play Rating ★★★★





Lightsabers and droids and Sith, oh my! KOTOR II brings the Force with authority.



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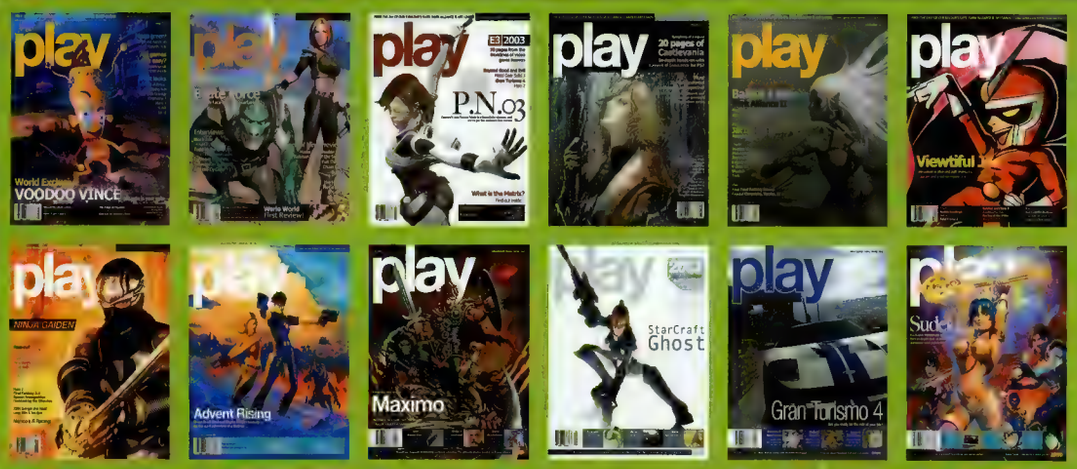
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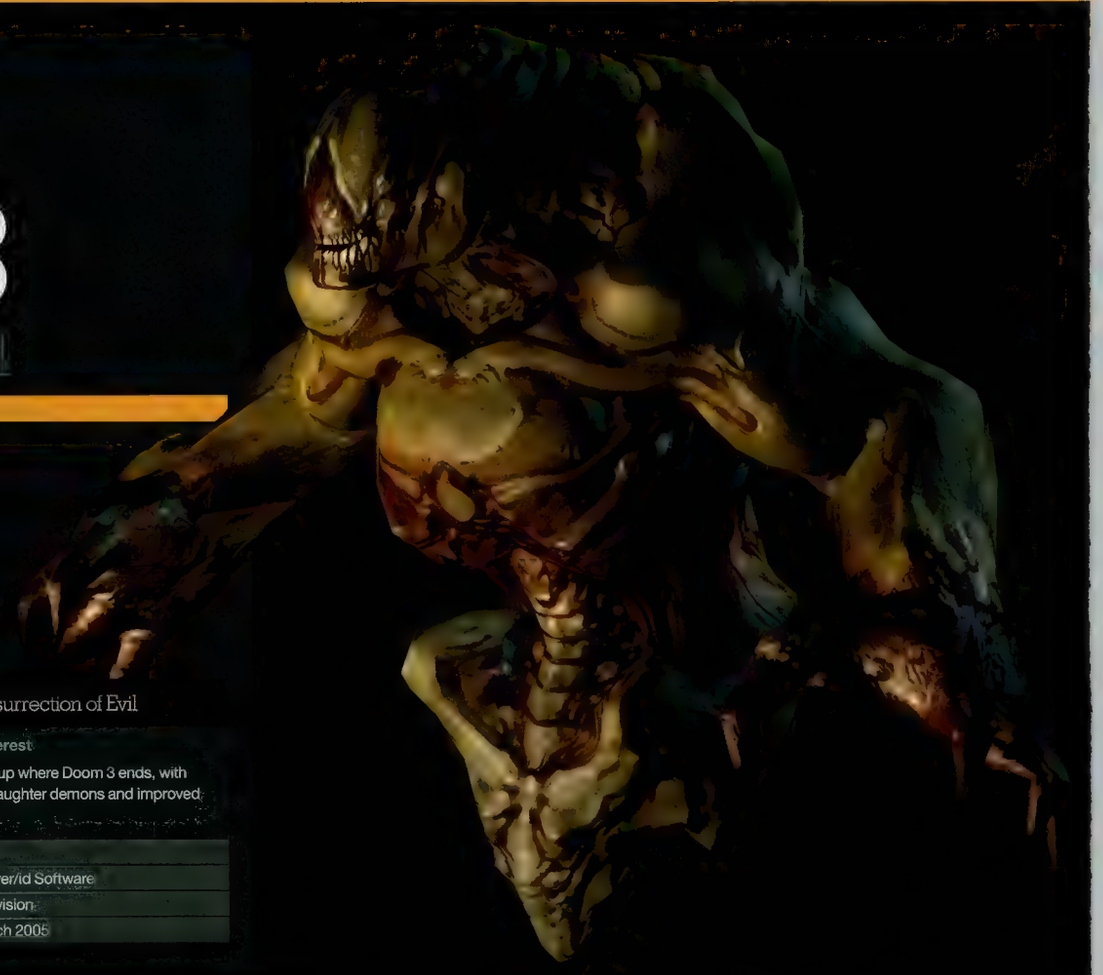
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Preview

Doom 3

Resurrection of Evil

Hell doesn't know when to quit



Doom 3 was a huge success for a number of reasons. The visuals in John Carmack's awesome engine floored most gamers, playing a major role in the game's appeal. Perhaps unexpectedly, Doom 3's slick storyline—the hellish invasion of Mars— also left a lasting impression with players. The grisly narrative continues in Doom 3's first official expansion, Resurrection of Evil. We summoned forth id Software co-owner Tim Willits and project lead Matt Hooper to investigate the upcoming mission pack. Mike Griffin

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil

Point of Interest

The story picks up where Doom 3 ends, with more ways to slaughter demons and improved graphics.

System: PC
Developer: Never/id Software
Publisher: Activision
Available: March 2005

Interview
Tim Willits, lead designer and co-owner, id Software
Matt Hooper, designer and project lead, id Software

play: When did production begin on Resurrection of Evil?
Matt Hooper: We started full production on this project over a year ago with Nerve Software. We benefited from almost eight months of overlapping development time with Doom 3. During the overlapping period, we worked a lot of plot hooks and character development into the original, then we carried these little subtleties over into the mission pack. Fans, especially those who might have played through the game more than once, will definitely pick up on some story elements that were buried in the original Doom 3. The other great thing about that overlapping time is that we were able to use feedback to change things in the mission pack. We found out that players really liked the ancient civilization area, so we actually start out here in the mission pack. Hell was also really popular, so we're definitely returning there too.

Since the mutant Sarge was blown away in Doom 3, who is the main point of contact this time around?
Tim Willits: Dr. Elizabeth McNeil is kind of like your Sarge in the mission pack. She was actually the one who got Swan and Campbell to come to the base in the original game, so she was basically the whistleblower on Betruger's experiments.

What's been happening in the Doom 3 universe since the original game?
Hooper: It's been two years since the "Incident," as the UAC calls it. Back on Earth, they played it off in their typical propaganda style: They explain to everybody that there was a terrible accident on Mars with no survivors, but they never reveal what happened up there. The mission pack comes along as the satellites that are still circling Mars have detected a faint transmission coming from Site 1. This is the original complex that the UAC set up for their experiments, and it's where they first discovered the ancient civilization. So the UAC recruits Dr. McNeil again. She worked very closely with Betruger in the past, and she's the leading authority on the ancient civilization; she eats this stuff up. Since Betruger sent her back to Earth after learning of her scathing report to Swan, she has no idea what happened after her departure. McNeil and her team of archaeologists and scientists are chosen to move in and trace the signal, and the UAC announces that they're renewing all of their Mars programs. This is pretty much where the game takes off.

What role does the player assume this time around?
Hooper: You're a different marine. This time you're a combat engineer leading a small team down into the ruins to investigate the signal. McNeil is remotely monitoring the situation and she'll be guiding you through the site. Eventually you make your way into an area they didn't know existed and you locate the unknown artifact. When you grab hold of it, you're suddenly re-introduced to the demonized Betruger—people who finished Doom 3 will love this—and he raises three huge demons that he sends after you. At that point, all hell breaks loose.

What happened to the Soulcube? That box was instrumental in taking

Double-Barreled Shotgun



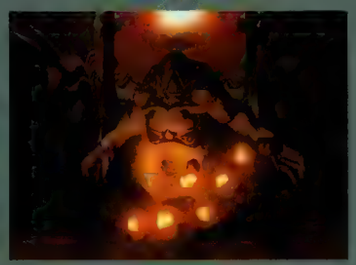
Who can forget the double-barreled shotgun in Doom II? That huge power and immensely satisfying "shick-shack-boom!" filled the air with gore. The DBS is back in Resurrection of Evil, ready to light up Doom 3's new eight-player deathmatch.

Betruger down.
Willits: In the original game, the Soulcube was the device used by the ancient civilization to battle the evil forces. There's a new device in the mission pack: one created by the demons during the ancient conflict between our universe and Hell. The ancients got a hold of this device and they entombed it far beneath the surface so nobody could make contact with it. That's the artifact, the ancient relic, and it's kind of like a homing signal for evil. Once it makes contact with an intelligent creature, a link is established and it can then open up dimensional tears to let demons travel into our universe. So we had the good weapon in Doom 3 with the Soulcube, and now we have the evil weapon in the mission pack with the artifact. As you play through the game, it will absorb new magic powers.

How do you gather this magic?
Hooper: So you've got the artifact now, and McNeil wants you to bring it back to her so she can figure out what's going on. As you fight your way to her location, you run across the three Hunters, as they're called, that Betruger sent after you—and you battle them one by one. When you destroy them, you absorb their power into the relic.

...and it requires all three of them to build up the power to take on Betruger?
Hooper: Exactly. Each of the Hunters will use their power against you until you destroy them, then it's all yours. The first power is the Helltime ability: Everything slows down to almost a complete stop, but you have total freedom of movement to maneuver around and blow away demons for about half a minute. There are some battles where it's extremely beneficial to use Helltime, but we've also set up some puzzles—such as platforms that are moving way too quickly—where using Helltime is a good idea. The second magic is the Berserker power. You'll do extreme damage with your fists and it raises all your weapon damage. When you defeat the final Hunter, you gain a limited Invulnerability power. At that point, you have Helltime, Berserker power and limited Invulnerability.

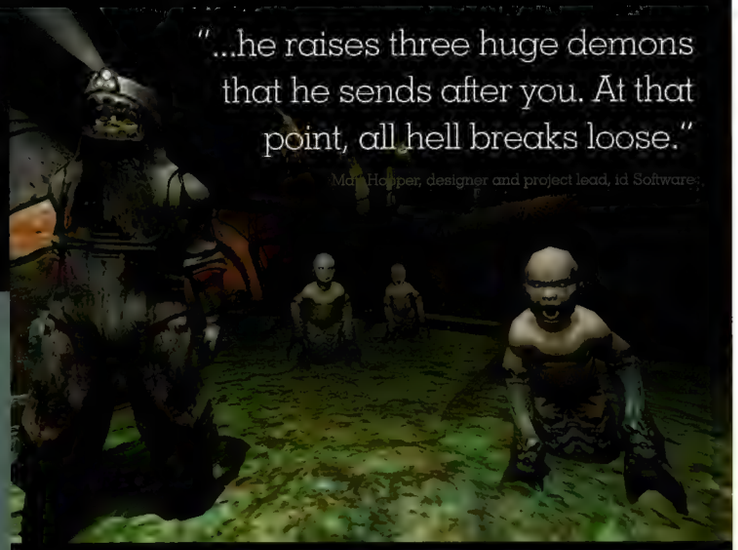






That gaping maw would fit nicely over your heart.

> "...he raises three huge demons that he sends after you. At that point, all hell breaks loose."
>
> Matt Hooper, designer and project lead, id Software



You mustn't play in the toxic waste, children.

Can you use the powers separately?
Hooper: We tried them separately, and it just felt better in this type of intense first-person action to have them stacked on top of each other as the relic absorbs each of them.

We've received reports of a double-barreled shotgun revival...
Hooper: Yeah, that's right. And it's pretty cool how we introduce it: The Sarge from the original had an office up in Site 1. There's actually a trophy case up on the wall of this little office we built, and it has the double-barreled shotgun inside. It's a unique weapon that no monsters or other marines have, and it has this nice old-school, meaty, heavy feel that fans of Doom 2 will just love. It's *really* good in Deathmatch also.

So you play a combat engineer this time. Surely this entails using a mechanized gadget or two against the demons?
Hooper: We definitely thought it would be cool to add a new toy to use, and you get this really early on because it's just *fun*. We all love manipulating physics objects, so we added a grabber-type weapon. The UAC calls it the Ionized Plasma Levitator, but all the workers just call it the Grabber for short. You can move, stack and throw any physics object from barrel-size and down. You can throw explosive barrels, pick up ragdoll bodies to hurl at other demons, it works on all the demons' projectiles and the Revenant's fireballs, and you know all those annoying little enemies like Trites and Cherubs? Yeah, you can use *them* as projectiles now.
Willits: What's cool about picking up the Cherubs is how they scream. [Tim offers a high-pitched "Waaah!"] It's very twisted. The Environment Suit is another new piece of gear that is really good. There's this light on your helmet that acts as a flashlight, so you can use your weapons at the same time.

Have you tweaked the engine at all?
Hooper: This is still probably the most powerful engine capable of doing the most amazing things. We just went a little further with it. We added a lot of graphical enhancements on weapons, and the Helltime effect is new.
Willits: Better water effects too—really improved liquid.

What kind of new enemies can players look forward to mowing down?
Willits: We have a new Forgotten, very similar to the Lost Soul in Doom 1 and 2. We have the Vulgar, a fierce little guy who kind of replaces the Imp in a lot of situations. There's the Bruiser, a big, hulking brute with two cannons on his arms. He's *extremely* difficult, but you'll have Helltime on your side by the time you meet the first one. We have a lot of new zombies as well.

Where did the zombies come from if this base has been abandoned for two years? Hell is pretty resourceful, but it needs bodies to produce zombies.
Hooper: If you look through your PDA at the start of Resurrection of Evil, part of your deployment notice includes UAC's new "commitment to safety." They've actually been back on Mars for about three months prior to your team's arrival, and they went ahead and *doubled* the security force to help you out.

Oh my. What a terrible mistake...
Hooper: Yeah, with Hell taking over, it could get ugly. **play**

Review

The Chronicles of Riddick
Escape from Butcher Bay

This is Riddick, looking better than ever

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 64 MB w/ pixel shader
CPU: P4/AMD 1.8GHz	Sound: Dx9 compatible
Mem: 256 MB	Internet: n/a

If you somehow missed the Xbox version of The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay, you owe it to yourself to pick up the enhanced PC version. Starbreeze has gone the extra mile in their Developer's Cut of this superb action epic, tweaking the game's impressive engine, adding a new sequence and restored voice-over, and they've also included a great DVD-style audio commentary. The implementation of this commentary is actually so inventive that we expect it to be mimicked—frequently, perhaps—in future titles.

As a small Swedish developer with a rather humble back catalogue, Starbreeze surprised everyone when they skillfully transformed this Vin Diesel movie property into a fantastic action game and a worthy prequel to the *Pitch Black* and *Riddick* films. And though Doom 3 owned 2004's best graphics, Chronicles of Riddick managed to steal a bit of the limelight with its powerful engine. Naturally, the PC version of Riddick supports higher resolutions and improved texture filtering, and Starbreeze has also provided high-end shader options and beautiful, soft stencil shadows. This version also adds a completely new Riot Armor sequence that has a great-looking HUD, striking muzzle flare and perfect camera bobbing. Besides being wickedly fun, this new mech suit shootout is actually a fundamental improvement to the pacing of events and action at the particular stage in which it appears. The PC Riddick also includes predictable benefits like quick saves and loads, and fans of the console version will enjoy the new grunts and threats from guards—all restored voiceover from the original recording sessions.

Did Starbreeze and VU Games *have* to add any of this stuff when porting The Chronicles of Riddick over to PC? Considering the game's low price, probably not. A straight port might have sufficed. And after you complete the game, yet *another* extra feature will be unlocked: a game-spanning developer commentary. Think of a DVD feature where the director and actors offer candid audio commentary about on-screen events, except in this case, you manually click on dozens of spinning Starbreeze logos scattered about the game world to initiate a voiceover. You'll learn about the creation of levels, AI, graphics and sound, and various idiosyncrasies are revealed—sometimes with screenshots—about objects in the immediate vicinity of the commentary icon. Basically everything you've ever wanted to know about Riddick's design is discussed, as well as some funny anecdotal bits that definitely fall in line with the game's Mature rating. The use of these commentary icons within the structure of real-time gameplay is a great idea, adding measurable depth and replay value.

Most Xbox players already know about the terrific blend of adventure, stealth and shooting action that Riddick provides. The game has undoubtedly improved in a number of ways in its transition to PC as a Developer's Cut, making it an essential experience on the platform. Mike Griffin



The mini-gun chews through this unfortunate guard.







Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

+ The new content is a great addition to an already superb action game.

− Minor model clipping still visible during real-time cutscenes.

Developer: Starbreeze
Publisher: VU Games
Online: None
Available: December 2004

play Rating ★★★★

"Starbreeze has gone the extra mile in their Developer's Cut of this superb action epic..."

Hardware Review

GeForce 6800 GT OC

Add some muscle to your PC gaming



Without a killer video card, games like Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 don't run the way they deserve to be played: fast frame rates with full details, textures and shaders enabled. A quick glance at hardware vendors may reveal some pretty expensive choices among the elite gaming cards. For sheer price versus performance, however, there's currently no better deal than BFG Tech's GeForce 6800 GT OC. If you're still using an older video card, the 6800 GT OC represents a serious improvement to your gaming experience.

Although it comes in at around 100 bucks less than high-end models, this BFG card ships with a healthy over-clocked (hence the "OC") core right out of the box. Between the buffed core and a 1000MHz memory clock, this card's raw poly-crunching power is rated at 555 million vertices per second. The GT OC also comes equipped with 256 megs of fast GDDR3 memory. In gaming terms, this means more performance in texture-intense titles. And thanks to its huge pipeline, this card kicks ass in pixel shader-intense games like The Chronicles of Riddick.

All these specs certainly provide interesting insight into the GT OC's theoretical performance, but we decided to run a few tests to illustrate the increase that one might gain with BFG's impressive card. We've compared the BFG GeForce 6800 GT OC to one of the better previous-generation cards, the GeForce FX 5950 Ultra. All tests were run on an Athlon 64 FX-51 system at 1024 x 768 resolution (in 32-bit color), using Nvidia's official Forceware 66.93 drivers.

GeForce 6800 GT OC

+ Powerful and reliable hardware with fantastic product support.

- This is a big card. You'll lose some precious space in your case.

Manufacturer: BFG Tech
Core Clock: 370MHz
Memory Clock: 1000MHz
Memory: 256 MB GDDR3

play Rating ★★★★

"...the 6800 GT OC represents a serious improvement to your gaming experience."

Final Fantasy XI: Vana'diel Benchmark 3





With droves of Tarutaru filling the screen, the High Quality mode of the official FFXI benchmark is a good fill rate test. Though not as dramatic as the other tests (FFXI is not shader-heavy), the 6800 GT OC enjoys a pretty substantial advantage here.

FX 5950 U: Score: 5110
BFG 6800 GT OC: Score: 5760
Increase: 13%

3Dmark05:





Futuremark's latest 3Dmark software runs real-time game tests using extremely complex models and state-of-the-art shading. BFG's powerhouse leaps ahead of the older card in this exhaustive next-generation benchmark.

FX 5950 U: Score: 1380
BFG 6800 GT OC: Score: 4588
Increase: 232%

Half-Life 2: "Coast" level demo



HL2's coastal level is a good example of the Source engine's ability to render huge outdoor areas. We decided to stress the GT OC in this test by enabling 16x anisotropic filtering. The results speak for themselves.

FX 5950 U: Score: 5110
BFG 6800 GT OC: Score: 5760
Increase: 13%

Far Cry: "Research" level demo



This short demo of Crytek's attractive shooter features heavy use of pixel shading and bump mapping. The 6800 GT OC stomps its older brethren, gliding through shading routines effortlessly.

FX 5950 U: Average FPS: 30.27
BFG 6800 GT OC: Average FPS: 128.61
Increase: 324%

BFG Tech's GeForce 6800 GT OC is a great high-performance gaming card available at a pretty damn good price. Not only is the card exceedingly well built, highlighted by great cooling components, but it also comes with a lifetime warranty and toll-free 24/7 live support. Highly recommended. Mike Griffin

Postscript

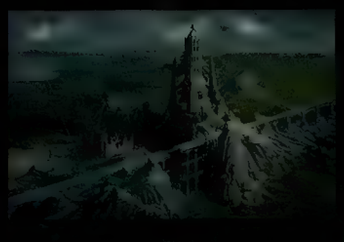
BioWare ramps up production on next RPG epic



Though it remains unsigned by a publisher at the time of this writing, BioWare's Dragon Age continues to make significant progress. The huge PC-only project represents the next generation of BioWare's RPG design, as the esteemed developer incorporates virtually everything that it has learned from KOTOR, Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights into an all-original fantasy universe. A large team of BioWare's top writers is formulating entire societies, religions and even languages for this new world. A next-generation engine will render the game's vast, exotic lands in a cinematic third-person perspective during exploration and an overhead view during the tactical real-time combat.

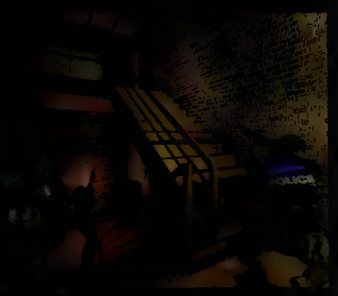
While Dragon Age is a class-based RPG replete with customization options, your characters will also have deep story origins involving critical player choices that unlock world-changing plot paths, heroes and villains, and even love interests throughout the game. Additionally, Dragon Age will feature a fully realized cooperative multiplayer element driven by the same core story and a revolutionary new toolset designed for end-users to create original campaigns set in the Dragon Age world. In terms of the game's length, "We should be somewhere in the range of 30 to 40 hours," says Bioware CEO Dr. Ray Mukyka. "We think that's a good size. Thirty hours seems to be the kind of length where people feel they've been given good value for their money, yet they can still finish it. One of our goals is to make sure people can finish our games, so they *want* to continue playing the game—whether replaying it or through an expansion or sequel."





SWAT 4 prepares to infiltrate





VU Games and Irrational are deep into development of the next title in the hit SWAT series, and they're sparing no expense when it comes to production and realism. SWAT 4 aims for precision tactical shooter gameplay across a full single-player campaign and a handful of intricate cooperative and competitive multiplayer modes, all mission-based and loaded of variable parameters. What makes this action so unique is the cool, calculated pacing—filled with tension and cautious squad movement.

SWAT 4 is being developed within the Vengeance engine, a modified version of the Unreal engine recently harnessed by Irrational in 2004's excellent Tribes successor. This technology proved to be a perfect match for the dense urban locales of SWAT 4's New York-style city, as each metropolitan venue is packed with gritty décor cast beneath striking contrasts in lighting. As expected, environment-based physics (referred to as "Real World Objects" here) will play an important role in the close-quarters action of SWAT 4, down to minute details like fatal chunks of shrapnel. The game will ship with a custom level editor package, providing mod-makers with the tools to alter enemy AI and positions, weapon effects and mission details.

The ebb and flow of objectives in SWAT 4 frequently involves stealthy team dispersal (whether as a cop or criminal) across busy indoor sets juxtaposed with quick strike gunfights. There's a simplified control scheme for relaying tactical orders designed as an extension to the action controls. Breaching a room or staircase locked-down by the enemy is a complex and coordinated affair in the realm of discreet operations, and tackling the missions as one might attempt in a conventional team shooter may result in a lost target objective, whether a group of fleeing offenders or an errant hostage. To seal the deal on realism and AI, Irrational actually contracted a professional SWAT consultation firm, engaging in extensive weapon and encounter training sessions at their facilities.

Irrational is the same developer that brought us the superhero RPG Freedom Force and the classic thriller System Shock 2, so we expect SWAT 4 to have a strong foundation of polished gameplay to go along with its painstaking attention to detail.

NPD PC Game Sales

Week of December 19 - December 25

01. The Sims 2 - EA
02. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
03. Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 - Atari
04. MS Zoo Tycoon - Microsoft
05. Lord of the Rings: Battle For Middle Earth - EA
06. The Sims 2 SE - EA
07. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
08. The Sims Deluxe - EA
09. MS Zoo Tycoon: CC - Microsoft
10. Rome: Total War - Activision

NBA Street V3

The best street b-ball game just got better — review

When I think of over-the-top basketball action, only one franchise comes to mind—the NBA Street series from EA Sports Big. With its brilliant gameplay, top-notch visuals and killer audio, the NBA Street games are often imitated but rarely surpassed. After giving players a flawless game with Vol. 2, the folks at EA Canada are ready to unleash the next chapter—NBA Street V3—taking arcade basketball action to new heights. With a plethora of new features and extras, V3 is, without a doubt, the best Street title yet.

New in V3 is the Trick Stick. Taking a nod from NBA Live, the right analog stick is now used for performing tricks on demand. Used in conjunction with the turbo buttons, players can easily perform crazy dribble tricks and dunks. You can even string moves together for sick combos—which we all know builds up for those outrageous GameBreakers.

Speaking of which, GameBreakers have also been tweaked for V3. In previous Street games, when you would activate the GameBreaker, the game would shift to a canned animated sequence showing the shot—with some cool visual effects added. Now after you build up a GameBreaker, you can actually perform combos during it so you can score more points. Plus, you're able to get your two teammates involved to perform three-man hook-up dunks. To give it more of a challenge, GameBreakers aren't free shots anymore. If you don't time your combos and dunks just right, you'll miss the shot.

Another new feature is the Court Creator. Here players get to create a court from the ground up from hundreds of different types of building blocks. You can customize everything from location, court surface and backboard styles to even the type of nets. In addition, V3 has 12 authentic courts from around the world, including Rucker Park, Venice Beach and Mosswood.

But what impressed me most about V3 was how much the visuals have improved. No one will argue Volume 2 looked pretty damn good, but after checking out V3, the players are on par with Midway's Ballers—and we all know that's pretty darn impressive. For V3, the player models have photorealistic heads and faces—you can actually see facial details and markings. The development team even incorporated cloth animations.

Other features of V3 include a rather addictive Dunk Contest, favorite NBA Heroes, all current NBA teams, 25 NBA greats and online gameplay on both PS2 and Xbox. Street fans, you have finally arrived—V3 is pure nirvana. Tom Ham





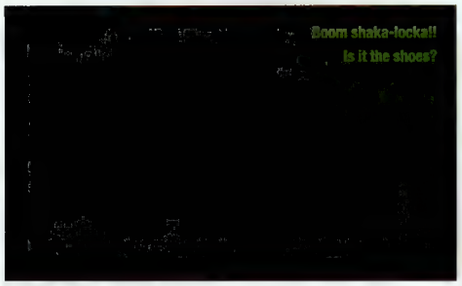
NBA Street V3

- Being able to change up your GameBreaker is pretty cool.
- I question the FreeStyle stick—not as precise as actual buttons.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Online: Versus mode (PS2, Xbox)
Available: February 2005
play Rating ★★★★









"For V3, the player models have photorealistic heads and faces—you can actually see facial details and markings."

Fight Night Round 2

Round Two has the eye of the tiger

preview

Without a doubt, Electronic Arts changed the way boxing games were played with the launch of the brilliant Fight Night 2004 early last year. Showcasing a new control scheme that gave players an incredible range of attacks and movement in conjunction with fantastic graphics and physics, the end result was nothing short of extraordinary.

Now a year later, EA Sports is working on the finishing touches on the next game of this powerhouse franchise, Fight Night Round 2. After playing through a preview rev of the game, one thing is for certain: EA Sports has raised the bar once again. In a word, the game is astounding. Just when you think you've seen it all, EA pulls even more tricks from its XXL sleeve.

What's new for Round 2? Plenty. For starters, there is the EA Sports Haymaker. Basically, it allows the player to control the power of each punch. So imagine being able to hold back and punch, slowly powering it up and then—BAM!—unleashing it on your opponent's chin. Remember the way Mike Tyson fought? Same idea here. Everyone knows in boxing that a match can be decided with one punch; with the Haymaker, you can experience it first hand.

Another key improvement revolves around movement. In the original Fight Night, every time you threw a punch or executed a defensive move, your feet were always planted. With Round 2, players can now move about the ring while they're punching or dodging. So if you're an agile fighter like cover athlete Bernard Hopkins, you can just stick and dodge. I especially liked the fact that I can now block, move, punch and lean away from a punch at any given time. Not only is this much more realistic, it forces players to move about and change up their attacks.

Round 2 also incorporates a very cool mini-game into the mix—the EA Sports Cutman. What's a Cutman you ask? He's the guy that takes care of the boxer between rounds—easing down the swelling, patching up cuts, etc. Here players actually take control of the Cutman and manage their boxer's damage. Using visual cues, players will know exactly what area of the face they need to concentrate on. And since Round 2 has added more realistic rules into the game, like TKOs and fights getting stopped by damage, you can bet that doing well as the Cutman will have an impact on your match.

Career mode was my favorite mode in the original Fight Night, and I was happy to see it much improved and deeper for Round 2. The most compelling aspect is the Create-A-Champ feature. Instead of using pre-determined variables—like face, head, body type, etc.—players use the analog sticks to sculpt the look of their boxer. And guess what? You do this all in real-time.

Other features include the ability to train right before a fight (you were only allowed to do this in career mode before), an improved money system—where you can now buy better people for your corner like trainers and Cutmen—and online gameplay on the PS2 and, finally, the Xbox.

Read on to learn about the development of this impressive game, straight from the mouth of Kudo Tsunoda, executive producer of the Fight Night franchise. Tom Horn

Fight Night Round 2

Point of Interest

The executive producer realized he made a boo-boo using Tigger last year, so thankfully he's out and real announcers are in.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Chicago
Publisher: EA Sports
Online: Versus mode (PS2, Xbox)
Available: March 2005

"Just when you think you've seen it all, EA pulls even more tricks from its XXL sleeve..."













Check out the projectile sweat as this guy's head snaps back like a twig

INTERVIEW

Kudo Tsunoda
executive producer, Fight Night franchise





"...we have given gamers total control over not just their fists but their entire boxer."

Kudo Tsunoda, executive producer, Fight Night franchise

play: The first Fight Night did very well. What did you learn from working on that game?
Kudo Tsunoda: Setting out to make Fight Night 2004, we had very clear goals with what we wanted to do with the game. From the very beginning, it was obvious we needed to provide people who played the game tight and intuitive control over their boxer in the ring as well as a more skill-based gameplay than other boxing games had ever been able to deliver. ...By giving gamers better control over their boxers, the tactics you can use in the ring are as endless as your imagination. With our great controls, each human player can develop their own unique fighting style to use in the game and then can customize their boxer based on how they fight. That was one really big lesson from working on Fight Night 2004—how important it is to let gamers fight in the game the way they want to as opposed to being forced to play a certain way dictated by the game. This makes fighting extremely addictive and is the main reason people are still playing Fight Night 2004 today, a year after its release.

We also learned how important it is to deliver innovative features for every game you bring to market. When doing a yearly sports game, you want to build on the good things of the franchise and still deliver all the new features you would expect to see in a completely new game. Doing Fight Night 2004, we had lots of room to add innovative features, and it set us apart from any other fighting game made before. But you cannot be satisfied with that. We have made as big a leap in quality and innovation from Fight Night 2004 to Fight Night Round 2 as we did from the old Knockout Kings to Fight Night 2004. You need to deliver that every year.

One cool thing that has become obvious from doing this game is how strong the correlation is between the dev team having fun making the game and the game itself being fun to play. ...It seems fairly intuitive that this would be the case, but I guess it has never been so clear as working on the Fight Night franchise.

Total Punch Control was a brilliant fighting system and it worked incredibly well. What have you done to improve it?
Total Punch Control gives gamers total control over their fists in the ring. The increased control over your boxer's abilities directly lead to a quantum leap in gameplay fun factor. But while last year's game gave you total control over your fists, it did not do a great job of giving you total control over your boxer. For instance, you could not control the power of any of your punches. In Fight Night Round 2, we have the EA Sports Haymaker. In boxing, a haymaker is when a boxer loads up all his power and tries to take his opponent out with a big one-punch KO. With the analog sticks this year, you can now add extra power on to each of our big punches, so on the fly you can choose if you want to throw a quick point-scoring punch or load up extra power on the shot and try and do some real damage.

If you wanted to throw a punch in Fight Night 2004, you had to stop moving in the ring. This completely nullified basic boxing tactics like "stick and move." Quick, fast boxers in the game had a lot of trouble against power punchers in last year's game as you could not use your foot speed to set up punches. Same was true for blocking. ...Not moving while blocking makes absolutely no sense at all. If you are trying to avoid getting hit, you want to be on the move, not stationary. In Fight Night 2004, you could not even do the classic Muhammad Ali "rope a dope" because you could not move your upper body and block at the same time. For Fight Night Round 2, we have given gamers total control over not just their fists but their entire boxer. You can now punch on the move, block on the move and rope a dope to your heart's content. Much like Total Punch Control added to the depth of in the ring gameplay tactics, having total control over you entire boxer's body in the ring has made the fighting exponentially deeper tactics-wise and even more fun to play.

We have also added a new analog quick combo system to dramatically improve the speed with which you can throw consecutive punches with the Total Punch Control system.

Can you describe the new punch dynamics and controls?
...To throw the EA Sports Haymaker, you use the right analog stick. For example, in Fight Night 2004, you could throw one type of right hook using the analog stick. You moved the analog stick out to the right and then swooped the analog stick forward to throw the punch. In Fight Night Round 2, you can still throw that same hook. Or, when your fist/analog stick moves out to the side, you can now crank it back, adding extra power to the punch before you swoop it forward. The more you crank it back, the more power added. But the more power you add, the longer it takes to throw the punch and the easier it is to defend [against].

...Our quick analog combo system works by simply rocking the analog stick across the top of the analog control area. This motion mimics the same arcing motion a boxer's fists make when he is throwing quick hook combos. You can now throw blindingly fast analog combos in Fight Night Round 2.

The facial animations and damage models are so realistic compared to last year's game; what new techniques did you incorporate this time around?
While having highly detailed and realistic character models is important in any sports game, it is absolutely critical in boxing. Unlike a sport like football where the characters are covered in bulky pads and helmets and are pretty far away from the camera, in boxing the characters hide behind not a lot of clothing and are up close and personal with the camera for the entire game. So we pushed hard this year to deliver the best-looking characters not only in any sports game, but the best characters seen in any game on any console. We doubled the amount of polys and the texture resolution we used on our boxers this year. Instead of painting textures to use for the boxer's faces and bodies, we now use high-resolution photos of the boxers and use those as in-game textures, giving us likenesses that are scary real. We also have been able to implement some graphic character techniques that most people are saying cannot be done until next-gen consoles come out. We have full upper body muscle animation on our entire characters. When they move around the ring, punch or even breathe, it looks just like a human doing it in real life. All of the damage and sweat effects have been redone, including an impressive multi-pass rendered sweat sheen that makes the entire look of the boxer's bodies look oh-so-real. A comprehensive physics and cloth animation system make each move the boxer makes natural and fluid. We also used mo-cap for facial animation this year, so the punch impacts and facial deformations really convey the power of each shot.

What new features in Round 2 are you most excited about?
Our Create-a-Champ feature is the most innovative create-a-character feature ever seen in a video game. We have given gamers the power of modeling their own character in the game, much like our artists do in their software packages, via console controllers. Instead of having to use a cumbersome menu and slider system like you see in other games, you are actually able so sculpt your body and each facial feature using the analog sticks. ...It actually takes about half the time to build a character than it did last year while also delivering better control and an infinite amount of options.

Other big new things for our game this year include online play for Xbox users (hooray!) as well as shipping the game on GameCube this year...

There have been many boxing games published, but very few reach greatness. What sets Fight Night apart from the rest?
Overall, the main thing is that the gameplay is incredibly fun and addictive. It is just a sweet game to play, either against the AI or another human opponent. You have total control over your character using the analog sticks, which leads to a skill-based gameplay system that allows you to play and be successful however you want to box. Plus, the graphics in Fight Night Round 2 are truly next-gen graphics on current-gen consoles. Pick up the game when it comes out this March and you will feel like you are sitting ringside at a championship fight. **play**

WWE WrestleMania 21

A wrestling revolution

preview

Forget what you know about previous WWE games on Xbox. THQ is. They realize that the last couple of entries—Raw and Raw 2—weren't quite up to snuff, and they've taken the appropriate measures. WWE WrestleMania 21 doesn't just offer a new name; it's a new developer, a new engine, new gameplay focus—new everything. And so far it's looking very impressive.

Even before you step in the ring, you can tell things have improved just from the visuals. For the first time in THQ's association with the WWE, all the animations are motion captured, most of them by the actual superstars themselves, with further refinements made by hand. What this means is that every motion looks extremely authentic—right down to Randy Orton's smarmy sneer and other intricate facial movements—but without any of the awkward transitions commonly associated with mo-cap. Extra attention has also been given to character models, which are now detailed to the point where veins can be seen in the arms, and gradual use of specular highlighting makes the characters look sweatier as the match progresses. Stains of sweat and blood will even linger on the mat. The game sounds good as well, with a fully licensed soundtrack, superstar voiceovers and full commentary, which, even in placeholder form, seems much better than the norm.

When it comes to actually lacing up the boots of your favorite grappler, the gameplay is very reminiscent of the highly regarded Aki engine familiar to fans of games like WrestleMania 2000 and No Mercy, with a button tap for a weak grapple and a long press for a strong grapple, and counters for strikes and holds relegated to the L and R triggers. The difference is that there are two grapple buttons found in WM21, each delivering different moves (although the particulars have yet to be determined), and a perfectly timed press of the counter button will result in a unique counter called a "pro reversal," specific to each move in the game.

Another area where WM21 seems poised to dominate is online. SmackDown! vs. Raw on PS2 gave players a taste of online mayhem, but WM21 goes much further, with four-player competition and every match type in the game available for online play, including cage matches, tag matches, triple threats, TLC matches, Hell in a Cell and even the Royal Rumble—complete with chat function. THQ hopes to promote online rivalries with the game's create-a-belt feature; players will be able to wager these belts online, and only by earning enough prestige points through your victories will you be able to challenge high-ranking titleholders.

Offline, the game's story mode once again has the player climbing the ranks, starting as a nobody, fighting against generic jobbers in gymnasiums and boiler rooms before working your way up to the WWE and claiming your spot as a legend. Along the way, players will be able to choose their fighting style—traditional, aerialist, power or technician—participate in minigames to build up stats, and unlock new moves and outfits. The one fly in the ointment is that only custom characters are available in Story Mode, so you can't play as your favorite superstar. Other than that, WrestleMania 21 is firing on all cylinders—a definite championship contender.

Chris Hoffman



"...every motion looks extremely authentic—right down to Randy Orton's smarmy sneer..."

WWE WrestleMania 21

Point of Interest

WWE WrestleMania 21 marks the video game debut of fan-favorite superstar Eugene Dinsmore.

System: Xbox
Developer: Studio Gigante
Publisher: THQ
Online: 4p multiplayer
Available: March 2005



Right: Edge demonstrates the new but familiar counter system, unfortunately for Chris Jericho.





NFL Street 2

Think you got what it takes to rule the streets? review

As the saying goes, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." The same holds true for the latest Street game from EA Sports Big. NFL Street 2 takes everything I loved about the original game and adds some new elements to make it a must-have for any football fan.

The heart and soul of Street 2 is the Own the City mode—this is where you'll spend most of your time. You create your player and then you hit the streets. As you play pick-up games, you'll get to recruit players, build up your reputation and start taking over new neighborhoods. The ultimate goal here is to make your way through Bay City and claim it as your own.

What I liked most about this title was how it managed to improve the already perfect control system from the original—especially with respect to Style Moves. In addition to all of the over-the-top moves from the previous game, players now can execute no-look passes and catches, one-handed grabs and even hurdle off walls. My favorite new addition is the button-mash ball strips. Basically, when you tie up the player with the ball, you can hit a button as fast as you can to strip the ball away from them. Oh, I can see how this is going to upset a few people online.

From a visual perspective, Street 2 looks a lot like its predecessor – which is a definitely a good thing. Player models are nicely detailed and show the extreme body exaggeration we've all come to love from the series. Tackles are incredibly brutal, and some of the Style moves will make you laugh out loud.

EA Sports Big has a good thing going here; let's hope they can keep it up. Tom Ham

"...some of the Style moves will make you laugh out loud."







NFL Street 2

It's a lot of fun running up walls and juking out your opponent.

The game still plays like the original. Nothing earth-shattering.

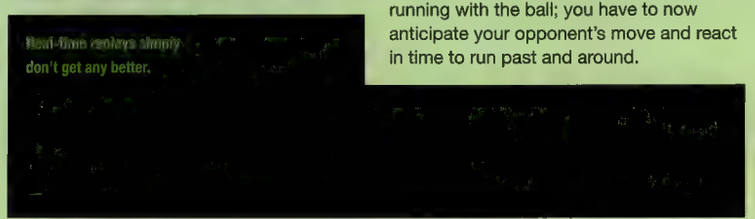
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Tiburon
Publisher: EA Sports
Online: Versus, challenge modes (PS2, Xbox)
Available: December 2004
play Rating ★★★★



Takin' it to the streets







Real-time replays simply don't get any better.

Winning Eleven 8

FIFA might as well throw in the towel preview

If you were to ask me if Konami could surpass their brilliant Winning Eleven 7, I probably would've said "hell no." But that was before I got my hands on Winning Eleven 8. Hard to believe but true: the best soccer game on the planet just got better. Developed by soccer god Shingo Takatsuka, Konami is making it easier for all of us to forget about EA's FIFA.

What could they've possibly added? Plenty. For starters, there are new kicks in the game, increasing the level of realism of the game tenfold. Enhanced penalty kick techniques and a new indirect free kick move give players more control than ever before. Winning Eleven 8 also incorporates a new dribbling system that plays more like real soccer. It's more than just merely running with the ball; you have to now anticipate your opponent's move and react in time to run past and around.

Player stats are now going to play more of an integral role during the game. Every stat from ball-handling to passing to shooting is rated. What's cool is that these stats are going to govern how each player plays and handles himself on the field. And as you progress through a season, you'll be able to see exactly how each of your players is doing and, in some cases, players will actually improve the more they play. Pretty cool.

Another cool addition is the on-screen referee. For the first time in the series, an actual referee will be running up and down the field and calling out fouls. Sure, it's nothing revolutionary, but it still adds something to the game of soccer that I haven't seen before. Tom Ham

"Hard to believe but true: the best soccer game on the planet just got better."



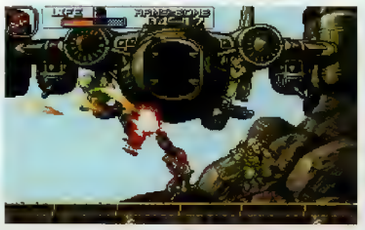
Winning Eleven 8

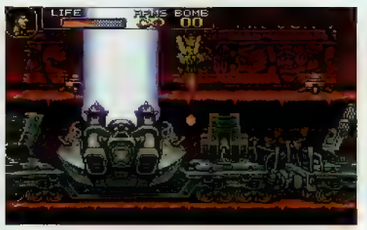
Point of Interest

Keep your fingers crossed—we may see online play on Xbox. Wahoo!

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: Spring 2005





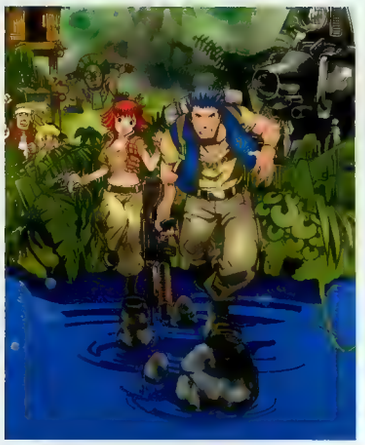


Metal Slug Advance

[redacted]	[redacted]
[redacted]	[redacted]
[redacted]	play Rating ★★★★

"Almost everything that was so great about the coin-op versions is found here..."

Not to sound like some sort of cliché-ridden PR machine, but Metal Slug Advance really does take the awesome action of the beloved Neo Geo shooter series and put it in the palm of your hand for this all-new installment. Almost everything that was so great about the coin-op versions is found here: the challenging bosses, the classic level design, the inspiring music, the wicked weapon power-ups, the quirky vehicles. The game even looks almost as good as its Neo Geo counterparts, with detailed backgrounds and those little animation touches, like enemies conversing until you open fire, then running in terror; you won't see any blood here though. Taking the Metal Slug experience a step further, SNK has even made some adjustments more suitable for GBA consumption—like the old Neo Geo Pocket versions, instead of multiple lives, you now have a health bar that can be restored by power-ups, plus they've added collectible ability-bestowing cards, a generous continue system and a much-appreciated auto-fire option. Metal Slug Advance is far from a pushover, however, as mastering this game, rescuing the hostages and unlocking all of its hidden areas will keep players blasting away for hours. About the only thing missing is a co-op mode. Hopefully MSA will hit big and we'll get Magician Lord next. Chris Hoffman





Sprung

System: Nintendo DS	Multiplayer: None
Developer: Guillemot	Available: December
Publisher: Ubisoft	play Rating ★★½★★

How much you like Sprung will probably correlate pretty closely to what you want to get out of the game. If you're looking for a mature (as in mature, not immature; it's not explicit, violent or filled with Tourette's syndrome) conversation-based graphic-text dating adventure, then you've found your game; if not, stay away. Sprung does fairly well for itself within the confines of such an unexplored genre, offering up some nice artwork and witty writing spread across both male and female scenarios. A lot of the game's conversations involve pure guesswork (hey, just like real life!) and there are a good number of typos, but the only other problem is that, while each conversation is well-written, there's no real flowing narrative backing it up. Chris Hoffman



Super Army War

System: Game Boy Advance	Multiplayer: None
Developer: Neko Entertainment	Available: February
Publisher: Atlus	play Rating ★★★★

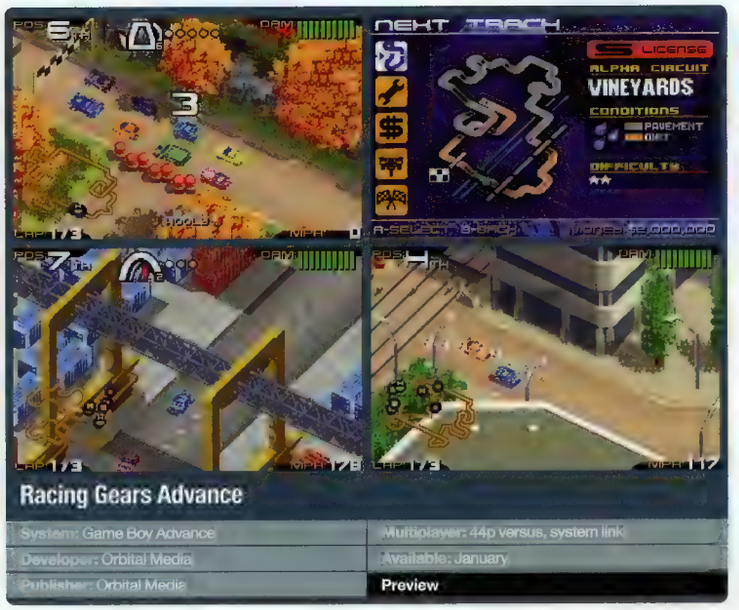
Super Army War is something of a hybrid between Choplifter and a real-time strategy game; as the pilot, it's your job to provide air support and rescue civilians while your troops, tanks and jeeps generate and march across the side-scrolling battlefield to frag the enemy into oblivion. It's kind of cool in concept, but less so in practice. Since your helicopter or plane can only hold limited ammo, you'll spend an awful lot of time heading back to mission HQ to resupply, and for some reason, you only have control over the RTS elements in later missions, an odd design choice to say the least. Aside from that, extremely slippery controls make handling both the chopper and the plane a chore. Chris Hoffman



Ace Combat Advance

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Orbital Media
Publisher: Orbital Media
Multiplayer: 4dp versus, system link
Available: January
play Rating ★★★★

Ace Combat is a game that, for now, should have stayed on console. The thrill of the series has always resulted from engaging in semi-realistic dogfights amidst some of the most gorgeous visuals ever seen—features that are sorely lacking in the GBA version. Instead, we're treated to some 2D sorties that lack any sort of give-and-take and battles against ground foes that pretty much boil down to looking for them on radar and picking them off before they even come into view. And what's with the frustratingly strict time limits? There is some decent mission variety and the presentation has that Ace Combat feel, but Namco would have been better served waiting to try this full-bore on DS or PSP. Chris Hoffman



Racing Gears Advance

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Orbital Media
Publisher: Orbital Media
Multiplayer: 4dp versus, system link
Available: January
Preview

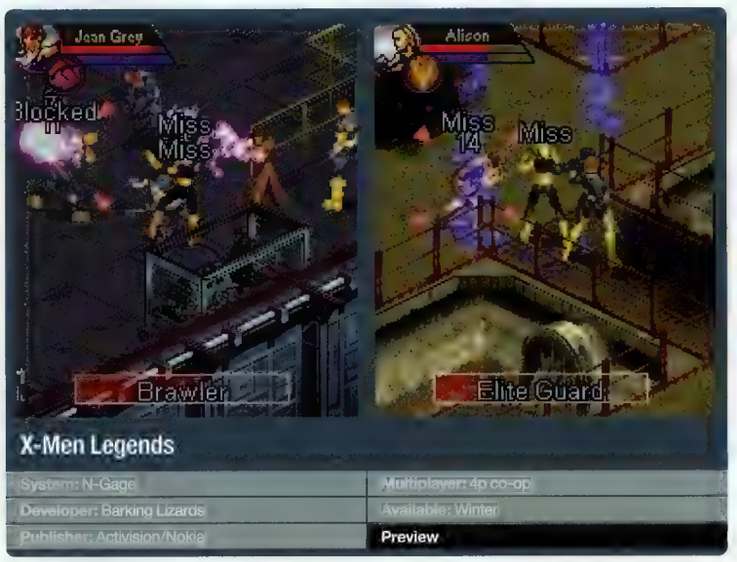
Orbital Media has been primed to pierce the veil of upper-echelon GBA development for a while now, and it looks like the time has finally come for them to stake their claim as a top studio dedicated to the mobile experience. Their first offering, Racing Gears Advance, takes the sticky addictiveness of top-down racing and pretty much perfects it. Not only is RGA especially deep for a GBA racer, stocked with 12 licensed super cars, a cast of original characters, 25 tracks and console game-like customization, but it's arguably the most detailed game of its kind you'll find anywhere. One has to go back to Power Dive Rally on the Jaguar to find a top-down racer this beautiful. RGA also has a mega-cool OST you can tune on the fly and looks insanely crisp running on the DS. Dave Halverson



Scurge: Hive

Preview

Scurge: Hive is Orbital's 3/4-view action-platform game in which the lead character, bounty huntress Aletha, does her best Lara Croft imitation, jumping, hanging, shimmying and climbing her way to decontamination chambers to reset the deadly virus—codename Scurge—coursing through her veins as she descends to the core of an off-world research facility for a showdown with the source of the Scurge itself and hopefully her own salvation. Along the way, aside from the well-paced adventure elements, there are plenty of biological, mechanical and energy-based mutants to beat on, along with massive bosses like the one shown here, using her array of energy-based weapons. Dave Halverson



X-Men Legends

System: N-Gage
Developer: Barking Lizards
Publisher: Activision/Nokia
Multiplayer: 4p co-op
Available: Winter
Preview

If there's a killer app for the N-Gage this winter, you're looking at it; in fact, this may be the gizmo's coolest game yet. The acclaimed action-RPG, considered the best X-Men game ever by many, certainly mutates well onto the small screen, using traditional 3D for its nicely animated characters (over cel shading) for a surprisingly crisp and detailed look. Legends also gets a major assist from the N-Gage's Bluetooth functionality, as this is one of the coolest multiplayer games around, weighing in at a hefty 40-50 hours of gameplay. Playing solo is much like the console game, where you move alone or as a group of mutants of your own design, selecting stance and formation while managing skills and attacks. Things take a little getting used to on the N-Gage's 12-button cluster, but overall the controls are laid out very well, and as with most N-Gage apps, the sound quality is exceptional, and CG cinemas are included. Dave Halverson


play anime

A unique and intense vision of abstract, psychological sci-fi horror - surprise hit of the 2004 Fantasia Festival.



HELLEVATOR

THE BOTTLED FOOLS

HELLEVATOR: THE BOTTLED FOOLS
STREET: 2/22/2005
APPROXIMATELY 97 MINUTES SRP: $29.95 SCI-FI

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APPLESEED

アップルシード

Hope for humanity

As passé as post-apocalyptic tales have become, none is quite as prophetic or plausible as Masamune Shirow's *Appleseed*—about a utopian city, Olympus, which rises out of the ashes to become the new beacon for life on Earth circa 2131, the essence of which revolves around a genetically superior race of clones called Bioroids designed and integrated into society to serve humanity and just maybe save it from its destructive self in the process. While Bioroids are capable of reproduction, only humans are allowed the right, leaving the Bioroids to life extension—like renewing your license at the DMV—a fine line that separates the classes that's about to come under serious fire within a political system divided between a supercomputer, Gaia, and the elders who do its bidding, as well as the military, which is still completely under human domain.

Elsewhere, the baddest ESWAT soldier on the planet, Deunan Knute, remains locked in combat out in the wastelands, unaware the war has even ended—a detail that, once pulled in, will have to take a backseat to the fact that her very existence coalesces with the balance of power; her ex-lover is not only alive but 75 percent cyborg; and utopia has opened for business—a display of drama and action seldom, if ever, seen in a CG animated feature. While the characters in *Appleseed* look to be merely toon- or cel-shaded, they are far more in motion, given that the texture is laid over motion-captured animation; the result is the most natural-looking artificial movement perhaps ever, which among the Shirow-inspired mecha and character designs equates to a mesmerizing overall visual production. The CG doesn't scream Shirow as the manga and anime did—the technology doesn't yet exist to bring his hand-drawn works to life—but it whispers it in every frame, a detail evident in a recent interview with director Shinji Aramaki. Dave Halverson

"...a display of drama and action seldom, if ever, seen in a CG animated feature."

Appleseed

- Spectacular animation coupled with Shirow-inspired CG make the old shiny and new.
- Mainstream soundtrack elements don't quite fit into the equation.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: R
Running Time: 103 minutes
Available: January 14

play Rating ★★★★

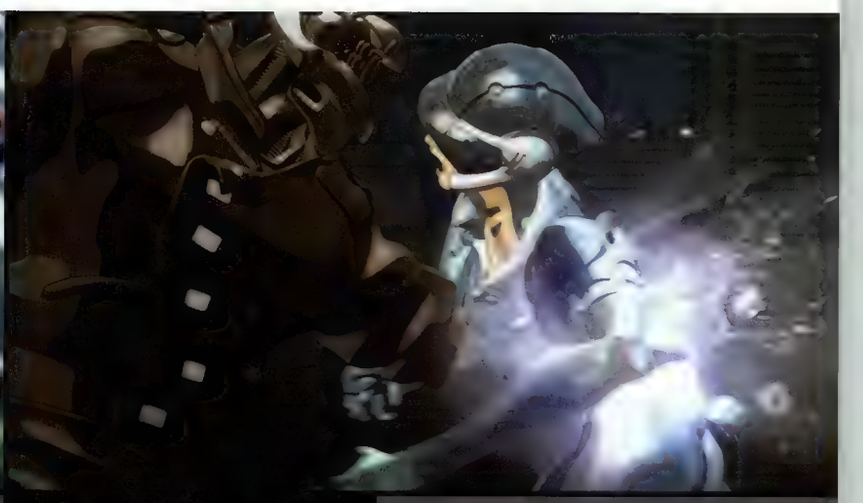
INTERVIEW

Shinji Aramaki
director of *Appleseed*

play: The film has a very unique visual style. At what point was this decided on, and had you toyed with any other methods of doing this?
Shinji Aramaki: Before I started working on this film, I was making a pilot for an animated (full CG) TV series called *Iron Maiden*. I spent two years on it. Unfortunately, this project did not go further after the pilot film, but it gave us a chance to develop the visual style of *Appleseed*—the characters of full CG combined with cel-shade (CG that has cel looks). I didn't try any other methods since I already knew from the first stage of the project that I would use this style.

What is it about this story that attracted you to this project?
I had been a fan of *Appleseed* ever since the original manga came out, and also I had been greatly influenced by Shirow Masamune, so I really wanted to direct this film. Especially its advanced vision of the world with large-scale themes, along with the denseness and speediness of the





visual images, mecha and story appealed to me.

In terms of the manga, where does this film fall?
This is not something I should decide, but I personally believe that this film was quite an achievement. It accomplished the full 3D CG (without any cel animators' involvement), while still keeping the sense and design of Japanese anime. Using this style, I would like to establish a new, original genre—that is not just anime or a substitute for some big-budget, live-action films.

How involved was Shirow with this film project?
We had several meetings with Shirow at the beginning of the production, but he told us to do whatever we wanted to do for the film, including the story and designs, and didn't give us particular instructions or anything. He was a very understanding observer.

What are some of your own directorial influences?
Everything I have ever seen (not only films and other visual products, but everything) must have had some kind of influences on me, but I particularly enjoy watching documentaries on science, technology, machines, weapons and wars, so you might find some traces of them in my work.

In your opinion, what are the ingredients of telling a good science fiction story? And how are these represented in *Appleseed*?
Powerful images (visual pictures) that can provoke astonishment and emotions—these are the most important ingredients.







Cel shading has never looked so good. What looks passé motionless moves with almost unprecedented fluidity.

How they are represented in *Appleseed*—the audience should judge that.

Who is Deunan? What is it about her character that makes her a compelling heroine?
Deunan is my favorite anime character (laughs). We certainly spent the most time and effort on Deunan—from designs, models [and] animations to acting. Why this character is so compelling—the audience should decide that. It makes me very happy when the audience likes her.

Can you give us some insights into what you were expressing through Deunan and Briareos' relationship?
Many different characters appear in this film—humans, clones that were genetically engineered ("Bioroid") and cyborgs like Briareos that have mechanical elements built into their bodies. Deunan and Briareos' relationship symbolizes that no matter how different you are in terms of appearances and origins, you can still understand each other.

What is the theme or message that you hope people will take away from this film?
I think it is quite arrogant of a director to tell the audience what to feel. I value entertainment above all else in films, so my most important hope for the audiences is to enjoy the film. If, in addition to that, the film could touch their heart or give them a chance to think of certain issues—in any kind of ways—it will be great.

How was directing this project different from your previous work?
The biggest difference was that this film had a wonderful, dependable manga to be based on. All of my other works were my originals. In this sense, I seldom lost my way.

What do you think sets Shirow's work apart from other sci-fi manga creators? After all, there are a lot of guys out there who can draw cute girls and cool mecha.
All the characters, mecha and cities that Shirow creates consistently reflect his own ideology and theme that are innovative, high-grade and elaborate.

"Powerful images...that can provoke astonishment and emotions—these are the most important ingredients."

アップルシード

What should people who are familiar with the *Appleseed* manga expect from the film?
The less you expect beforehand, the more satisfied you get afterwards (laughs)—just kidding! I am also a fan of the original manga, so I can totally feel their anxieties. Here was my objective as a director: "Make an incomplete manga into a 100-minute-long film that can be enjoyed by as many people as possible, without ruining the manga's images, designs, messages, characters, actions and other charming elements." Many parts had to be changed from the original manga in the process of the production, but the elements I really wanted to keep were left intact. Please take this into consideration, and enjoy the film!

What were some of the triumphs and challenges of combining cel-shading with 3D CG?
We used 3D CG with cel-shading, but no "hand-drawn" cels in this film. If you are asking me about the triumphs and challenges of combining 3D CG with cel-shading and usual 3D CG without cel shading—the triumphs were that we got the appeal of cel animation characters and details of 3D CG mecha and backgrounds at the same time. We also had a flexibility of camera movement. On the other hand, we had a hard time establishing the composition style, for we had to put two different shading styles into one picture. But this problem was overcome, thanks to Mr. [Yasuhiro] Otsuka, the CG director, and the rest of the amazing crew members.
play

GANTZ

The game of life...after death

Just when you think you've seen and heard it all and conquered every cranny of the absurd to the point you simply cannot be surprised, ADV goes and drops *Gantz*, about a real-time purgatory-come-reality-show for the recently and not-so-dearly departed. Our journey begins with the death of two long-lost friends when fate finds them reluctantly helping a repugnant wino who's fallen onto the subway tracks. The wino, of course (fate's a bitch), makes it to safety, while Kei Kurono and Masaru Kato find themselves witness to their own dismemberment via locomotive, only to find themselves whole again in a strange apartment filled with other lost souls and one big, round, black, monolithic orb, as if someone raided the late, great Stanley Kubrick's prop storage. From here, the game in which they must all participate begins, hunting down aliens that have invaded Earth, complete with a scoring system—like protagonists in a post-mortem video game. Think *Men in Black*, only instead of suits they wear battle suits, HQ is a two bedroom and, well, they're all dead, and thusly simultaneously dealing with their individual trauma.

Morbid yet entertaining in a most unsettling way, what's all the more disturbing about *Gantz* is its displaced sense of humor. In Volume 1, we go from violent death to attempted rape to an onion boy that looks like he'd be more at home in *Excel Saga*—a turn of events that left me frozen, mouth agape as it came to a screeching halt after a mere two episodes. It's a pity that each volume is so brief in duration, especially the first, which leaves us dangling from a mile-high episodic precipice. What is *Gantz*, and who is the guy plugged into its inner core like a meat puppet? Is everyone dead, or is it all some type of alternate reality taking place outside of death's door? I guess we'll just have to play along and find out...two episodes at a time. Dave Halverson

"Is everyone dead, or is it all some type of alternate reality taking place outside of death's door?"





Gantz

Excellent production, insanely fresh story and as bonkers as all hell. Only in Japan.

Two episodes per ain't gonna cut it, and onion boy? You can do better than that.

Released by: ADV Films

Rating: 16 and up

Running Time: 50 minutes

play Rating ★★★★



Heads floating in the breeze mark the *beginning* of the journey.

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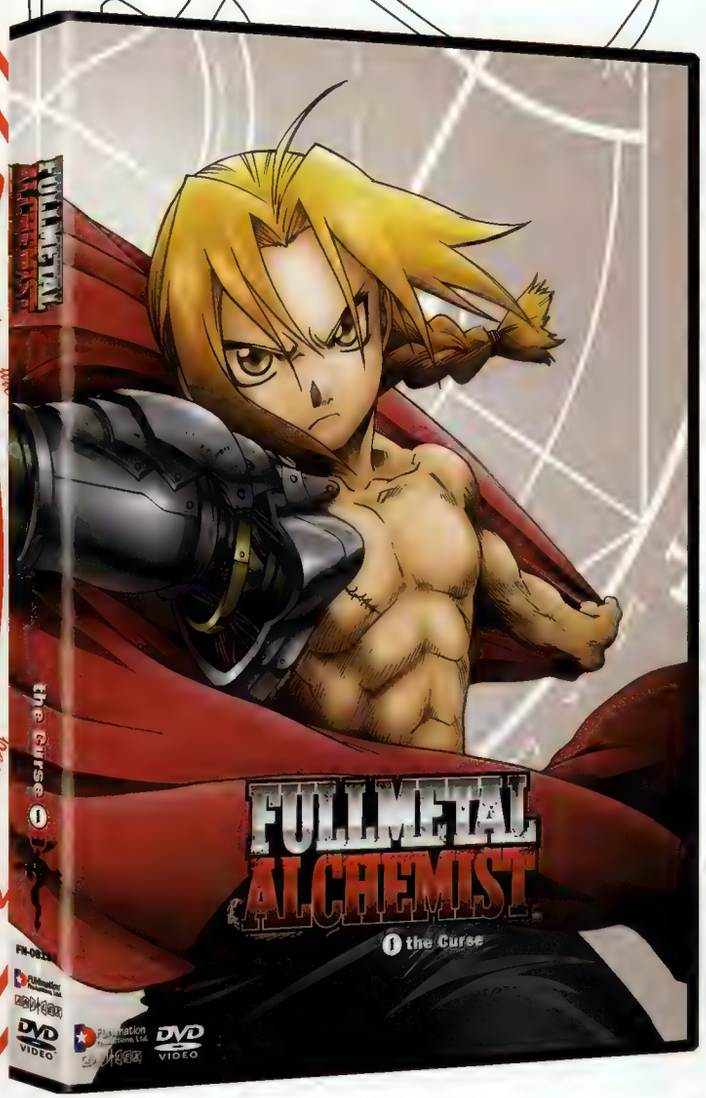
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One of—if not the—greatest anime ever."
-Zac Bertschy, Anime Insider

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-Kareem Harper, UGO.com

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-Gina Gallego, Animerica

"This is one anime series you can't afford to miss."
-Chris Johnston, NewtypeUSA

"Combine equal parts alchemy, neo-western drama, and comedy and you've got one helluva cool show."
Dave Halverson -Play Magazine

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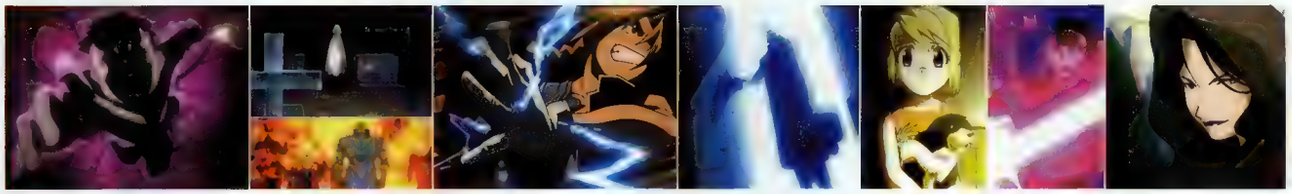
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*Based on three week ratings for Households and Persons 18-34 November 6 – 20, 2004. Source: Nielsen Media Research.

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must-have anime, manga & music

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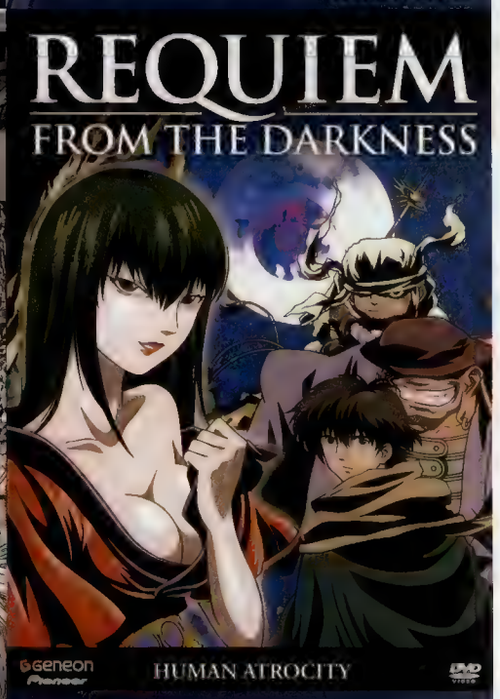


Warcraft: The Sunwell Trilogy

Publisher: TokyoPop / **Now Reading:** Sneak Peek

The manga event of 2005 for gamers and manga fans alike, The Sunwell Trilogy—penned by bestselling fantasy author Nicholas Knight & illustrated by Jae Hwan Kim (King of Hell)—is looking to be the ultimate excursion into the Warcraft universe. If these [illegible] indication, we're in for a one spectacular trilogy.

watch this



Requiem from the Darkness

Released by: Geneon Entertainment

Now Playing: Volume 2 - "Human Atrocity"

Human Atrocity spins us ever deeper into the dreamy psychosis of Momosuke's travels in one of 2004's best new series. Two down, two to go; *Requiem* continues to deliver its own unique brand of Gothic horror in mesmerizing strokes.

read this



Hyper Police

Publisher: TokyoPop

Now Reading: Volume 1

In a future where the animals walk, talk and eat among us (or sometimes eat us), Nekoshi the cat girl keeps the peace, but is she also on the menu? *Hyper Police* is just indescribably cool. I love biker pigs on street bikes!



Mobile Suit Gundam Seed

Publisher: Del Rey

Now Reading: Volume 3

To truly sop up the reams of intrigue in the interstellar space opera incarnate, *Mobile Suit Gundam Seed*, you need to read it. Everything about this fusion of action and drama screams epic, and it's loaded with cool design files and profiles.

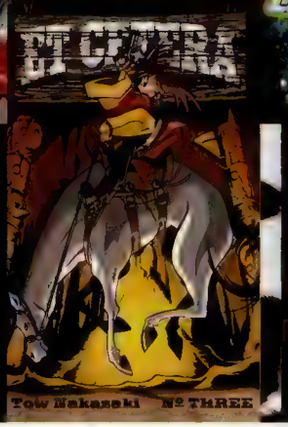


Et Cetera

Publisher: TokyoPop

Now Reading: Volume 3

Mingchao is headed west to become a Hollywood star...provided she can cut through the scourge of the land with her Ete Gun, which makes for some of the coolest shootin' this side of the Bebop. Wickedly fun and impeccably illustrated.





Negima! Magister Negi Magi

Publisher: Del Rey

Now Reading: Volume 3

Who needs Harry Potter when *Negima!* gives us a 10-year-old prodigy stepping into an all-girl magic academy...as a teacher!? Negi Springfield is about to get educated, all right!



Rei Ayanami & Asuka grimrock! Mix Edition

Released by: XEBEC

Wonder Showcase brings us these incredibly cool special Mix Edition Evangelion action figures sculpted by Kawanishi Ken (grimrock!) after the garage kit sold out immediately. They're easy to find online...for now. Better hurry though—so cute.

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"TWO THUMBS UP" SISKEL & EBERT

"A VISUAL TOUR DE FORCE"
WIRED MAGAZINE

GHOST IN THE SHELL took the world by storm, exhibiting a new dimension of anime with unprecedented, mesmerizing cinematic expression. Seamlessly merging traditional cel animation with the latest computer graphic imagery, this stunning sci-fi spectacle challenged the boundaries of mainstream animation with detailed artistic expression and a uniquely intelligent story line.

Veteran director Mamoru Oshii skillfully creates the ultimate anime experience in this futuristic masterpiece based on the ground-breaking comic book by Masamune Shirow. A movie that questions human existence in the fast-paced world of the information age, this award-winning, cyber-tech thriller has established itself as one of the best Japanese animation films of all time.

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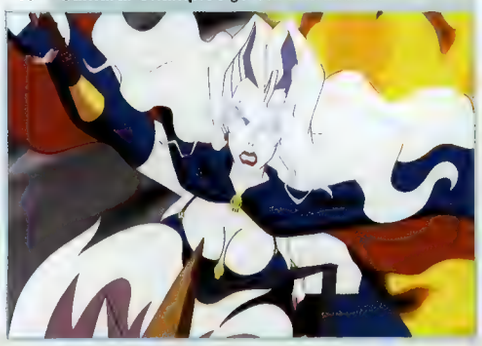
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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Lady Death**	*adv films*
02	**Inu Yasha The Movie 2**	*viz, llc*
03	**Parasite Dolls**	*adv films*
04	**Requiem from the Darkness**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**URDA: Third Reich**	*media blasters*
06	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
07	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
08	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
09	**Peace Maker**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*



Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Appleseed**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
04	**Get Backers**	*adv films*
05	**The Daichis: EDF**	*geneon entertainment*
06	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
07	**Ikki Tousen**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
09	**Texhnolyze**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**Shaman King Uncut**	*funimation productions*



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Peacemaker
adv films

Tetsunosuke will have his revenge! ...Courtesy of Gonzo!



Requiem from the Darkness
geneon entertainment

The best anime horror show perhaps ever. Do not miss Requiem.

Dave Halverson

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
03	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
04	**Requiem from the Darkness**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Appleseed**	*geneon entertainment*



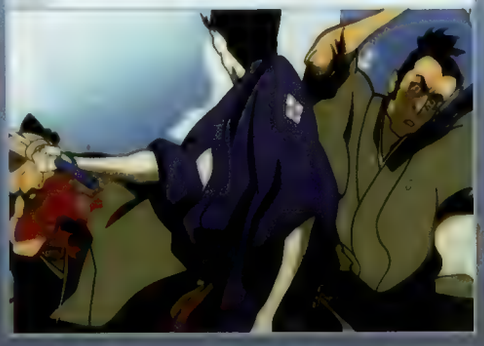
Rod Peters

01	**Gantz**	*adv films*
02	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
04	**Gundam Seed**	*bandai entertainment*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*



Nelson Lui

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Bubblegum Crisis OVA**	*animeigo*
03	**Appleseed**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Popotan**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Petite Princess Yucie**	*adv films*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**FullMetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
02	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
03	**Get Backers**	*adv films*
04	**Ikki Tousen**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Shaman King Uncut**	*funimation productions*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Et Cetera**	*tokyopop manga*
02	**Hyper Police**	*tokyopop manga*
03	**DearS**	*tokyopop manga*
04	**xxxHolic**	*del rey*
05	**Gundam SEED**	*del rey*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**Appleseed OST**	*tofu records*
02	**Refrain of Evangelion**	*geneon anime music*
03	**Abenobashi OST**	*geneon anime music*
04	**Sonic Heroes OST**	*geneon anime music*
05	**Gungrave OST**	*geneon anime music*

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The Village

Starring: William Hurt, Joaquin Phoenix, Bryce Dallas Howard, Adrien Brody
Director: M. Night Shyamalan
Released By: Touchstone
Rated: PG-13

The undeniably talented M. Night Shyamalan will likely never spin another ending as shocking as *The Sixth Sense*, and his strained efforts to do so have come to a damaging head in *The Village*. You can practically see the self-conscious wheels turning as the script grinds ahead, becoming more ludicrous as the film builds to its forced climax. But as we begin to learn just what the ominous creatures lurking in the woods of this pious, ostensibly 19th-century community really are, there is a quiet spirit of intrigue that keeps the film crawling down our spine. Shyamalan is a spectacular visual director, and here he creates an evocative mood, no matter how plodding its course. Simply soaking in a shot of a lantern shaking in the wind-driven rain can be transfixing. It's disappointing, but if you can give into the complete effect of the film and forgive the heavy-handed dialogue—the metaphorical weight behind the story saves it from complete collapse—the film works.
Extras: Deleted scenes and throwaway Howard diary. Short featurette deconstructs the filming process in nice detail; mildly amusing home movie. BF
Movie: B- **Extras:** C+



Garden State

Starring: Natalie Portman, Zach Braff
Director: Zach Braff
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: R

Garden State is a warm, eccentric, coming-of-age drama that shows a special talent in first-time writer-director Zach Braff. Braff also stars as Andrew Largeman, a struggling Hollywood actor who, after nine years away from his hometown of New Jersey, returns to attend his mother's funeral. Medicated since a young boy by his taciturn psychiatrist father, his strained relationship may be familiar fodder, yet the film takes unexpected, subtle turns as it exposes the confused emotion of low self esteem and personal hesitations. As Andrew reconnects with old friends, he meets an equally off-center love interest, played by a luminous Natalie Portman. As the two come to grips with their strange lives, the exaggerated tone may not always ring true, but the overriding feelings of loss, loneliness and desperation are genuine and never overplayed. The film doesn't wallow in sorrow, painting its characters in a hopeful humor that, by the end of their journey, feels a part of our own lives. *Garden State* is thoughtful, intelligent and gentle, a small and visually sparkling picture that creeps up on you as one of the year's best.
Extras: Portman and Braff entertainingly banter on the first commentary track. For a more technical discussion, Braff joins his editor, DP and production designer for a second track. The 27-minute featurette will be especially interesting to film fans. Several deleted scenes and bloopers are par for the course. Brady Fiechter
Movie: A- **Extras:** B



The Grudge

Starring: Sarah Michelle Gellar, Jason Behr, Clea DuVall, Bill Pullman, Kadee Strickland
Director: Takashi Shimizu
Released By: Columbia TriStar
Rated: PG-13

Remade for American audiences much like *The Ring*, *The Grudge* rises above the obligatory house-and-restless-spirits-within framework via real flesh and blood entities that have no qualms about being seen, but rather seem to revel in sucking the life-force out of anyone unfortunate enough to step into their miserable purgatory…and they don't stop at the front door. These demons follow you home—to the office, wherever, and can suck you clean out of existence. As such, *The Grudge* relies almost solely on ambience and shock value for its appeal, which, thankfully, it delivers with bone-chilling resolve.

Non-linear yet formulaic in structure, *The Grudge*'s scares are outwardly contrived yet still manage to scare the living piss out of you due to great performances from the U.S. and Japanese cast (lead by Gellar, who sheds her *Buffy* skin within seconds) and Takashi Shimizu's masterful filmmaking style, using as little CG as possible for a look that leaks right out of your screen. Shimizu uses the house itself, which is undaunting otherwise, and the twisted forms of his tortured souls to deliver a mesmerizing dose of residual rage and its ensuing revenge with a Kubrick-like eye for perfection. There is no big mystery here, just a ghost story impeccably told. American filmmakers take heed. Dave Halverson
Movie: B **Extras:** B



Top Ten DVDs of 2004

Aside from the fact that QT rose from über-cool filmmaker to national treasure status, 2004 was a banner year for action-adventure, fantasy, comedy and sci-fi—all things worth paying $8.50 for.



Kill Bill Volume 1 & 2
Because no one makes a sandwich as cool as David Carradine, and no one has ever made a film as slick and style-oozing as *Kill Bill*.

Lord of the Rings: Return of the King
Hands down the greatest fantasy film ever made, as well as the most visually striking and panoramically awe inspiring. A true international classic.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
Director Alphonso Cuaron's take-no-prisoners darker *Potter* introduced the institution to whole new generation of fans and the *Potter* faithful alike.

Hellboy
Guillermo Del Toro's thoughtful, painstakingly religious-to-the-material film adaptation should have soared way beyond the $100 million mark.

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story
What's funnier than a guy getting beaned in the head by a crescent wrench winged with malice from Rip Torn? Nothing.

Triplets of Bellville
A film that says nothing, yet is more compelling than most; the power of expression through animation has never shined brighter.

The Matrix Revolutions
The single most ambitious jaw-droppingly beautiful sci-fi trilogy of all time. *Matrix* naysayers need to take a chill pill.

The Chronicles of Riddick
The year's most underrated sci-fi saw Vin Diesel once again deliver such a perfectly honed action performance that ordinary humans could only ridicule.

Spider-Man 2
You simply cannot do Spider-Man any better than this. If only it was Lobo! It's gleamingly commercial but wonderful nevertheless.

Wizards
Ralph Bakshi's slipshot masterpiece knows not the effects of time. The true spirit of hand-made animation will live on through *Wizards* forever.

Best Boxes/Special Editions

Ultimate Matrix Collection
So long and in-depth, the white rabbit gets tired.

Star Wars Trilogy
Despite the fact that Greedo shoots first.

Return of the King Extended Edition
Straight from the Shire. The method to the madness.

Aladdin Collector's DVD Gift Box
Because we love the Genesis game!

Seinfeld Limited Edition Gift Set
Because nothing is very funny.

Photographic mobile phone

Sony Ericsson S710

www.sonyericsson.com Price: carrier dependent



In a word, the S710 is badass. This tri-band GSM phone showcases a unique swivel design and a 1.3-megapixel camera. Bottom line: if you're looking for a wickedly cool phone with tons of functionality, the S710 is the phone for you. For starters, the vibrant screen measures 240x320 pixels and sports 262,000 colors—perfect for MMS EMS messaging. On the entertainment side of things, the S710 plays MP3 audio, MPEG 4 video and has 40-voice polyphonic sound. And with 32MB of memory, there is plenty of room to install applications and store pictures; but if you're looking for more space, there is a built-in Memory Stick Duo slot—perfect for MP3 files and videos. The camera on the S710 is the best we've seen on a cell phone. When folded, it actually feels like a digital camera in your hands. The built-in flash is a nice touch. Pictures can be emailed or used as Picture ID for callers. Other features include USB support, Bluetooth and built-in speakerphone.

Desktop music mixer

Hercules DJ Console

www.hercules.com Price: $299.99

If you think you've got the skills to take on DJ Sasha or Ferry Corsten, then the DJ Console from Hercules may be for you. Now available on Mac, this portable USB device allows aspiring DJs to mix two digital audio files with incredible ease. At first glance, the DJ Console may appear to be a toy, but it's far from it. Offering four-channel playback, separate stereo output monitoring and four selectable inputs, the DJ Console is on par with studio equipment. Music files can be manipulated with the two vinyl-style decks—much like traditional "wheels of steel." Beat mixing, scratching—whatever flavor you're into—this baby can handle it. And since it is Mac OS X compliant, Native Instrument developed a special version of Traktor DJ Studio software. These cutting-edge sound tools allows for multiple effects, looping and other special effects.



Portable satellite radio

Cambridge SoundWorks PlayDock XM

www.cambridgesoundworks.com Price: $199.99

No one can deny the popularity of satellite radio. It's like TiVo: once you experience it, you'll wonder how you ever lived without it. Now the brilliant folks at Cambridge SoundWorks want to make sure you have your XM Satellite Radio wherever you go. Introducing the PlayDock XM. Think of it as a boom box for your XM. Designed specifically for the Delphi XM Roady (which is the most popular portable XM radio out there), users can experience high fidelity sound and booming bass that only Cambridge can deliver. In addition, the PlayDock XM has a built-in rechargeable power source which lasts for up to 10 hours of playtime. But to appreciate the PlayDock XM is to experience it. Reception was crystal clear (thanks to the included 20-foot satellite antenna) and the sound quality was fantastic. The only downside to the PlayDock XM is its weight. Weighing at almost 14 pounds, it's not the most portable of units. But if you're chillin' on the beach or by the pool, this would be the best thing to have if you want to jam out.




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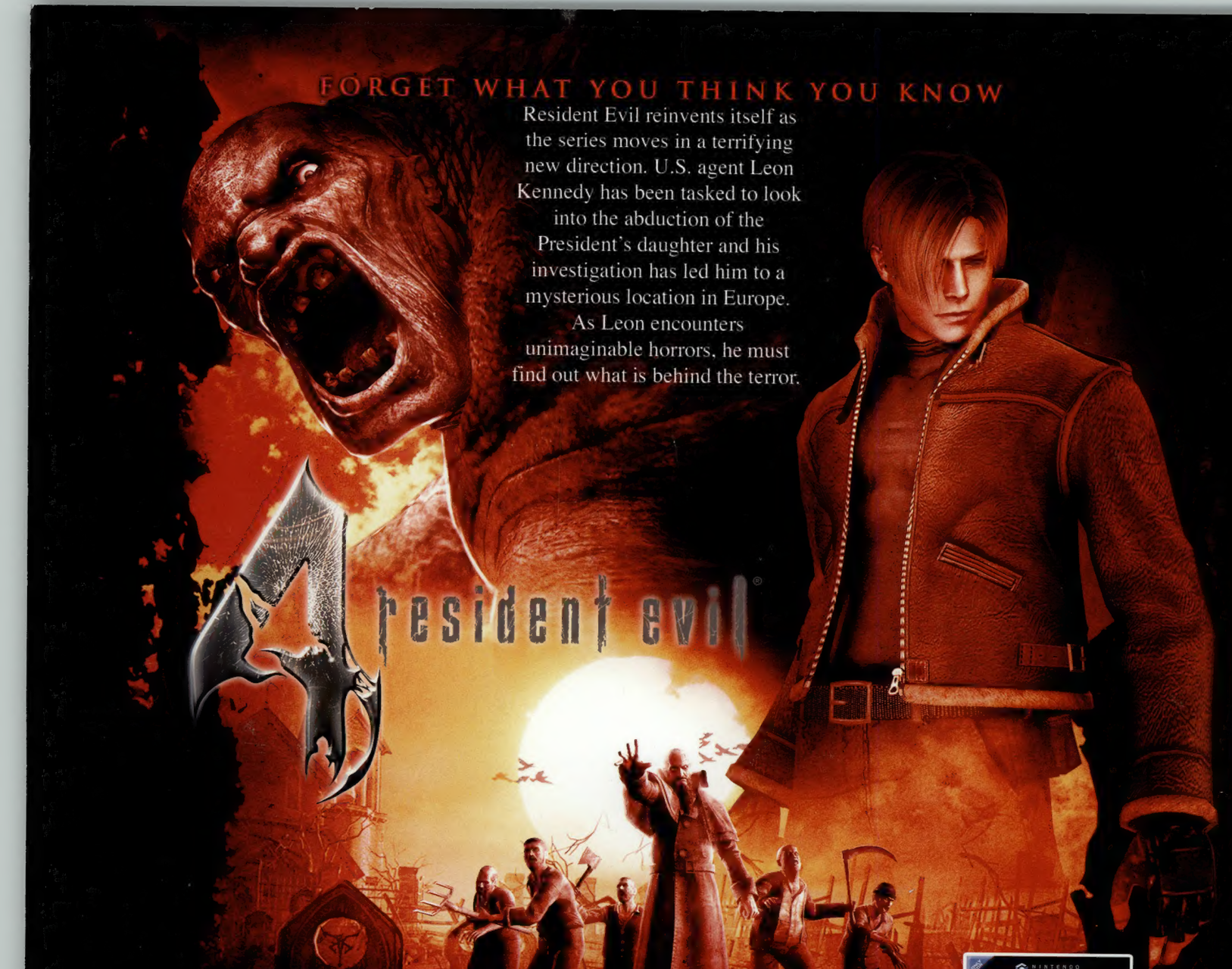
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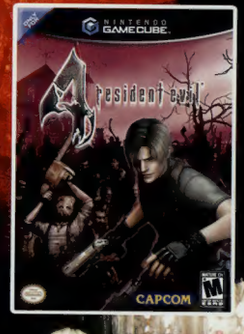
FORGET WHAT YOU THINK YOU KNOW

Resident Evil reinvents itself as the series moves in a terrifying new direction. U.S. agent Leon Kennedy has been tasked to look into the abduction of the President's daughter and his investigation has led him to a mysterious location in Europe. As Leon encounters unimaginable horrors, he must find out what is behind the terror.



EVIL HAS EVOLVED

- Fast paced, edge of your seat action.
- Fantastic 3D graphics and effects – never has Resident Evil looked so good…or so terrifying.
- New behind the back camera view allows for intuitive movement.
- Cunning enemies use their abilities to team up and attack the player en mass.
- Commandeer vehicles… but don't expect a safe ride.











MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

OFFICIAL GUIDE AVAILABLE FROM BRADYGAMES TAKE YOUR GAME FURTHER

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